



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

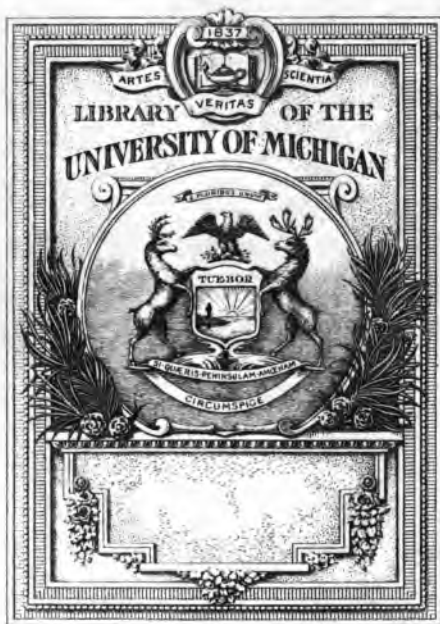
We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

A 922,097





GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

Frontispiece

G. K. CHESTERTON

A CRITICISM

Mr. C.

WITH FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS



LONDON: ALSTON RIVERS, LTD.
BROOKE STREET, HOLBORN BARS, E.C.

1908

DEDICATED
TO
THE CLEVEREST WOMAN IN LONDON
M. L. C.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	PAGE ix
CHAPTER I	
ORIGINS	I
CHAPTER II	
THE FIRST PHASE	30
CHAPTER III	
A CRITIC OF LETTERS	65
CHAPTER IV	
THE DRIFT TOWARDS ORTHODOXY	95
CHAPTER V	
THE ASSAULT ON THE MODERNS	124
CHAPTER VI	
G. K. C. AS ANTI-LIBERAL	162
CHAPTER VII	
A TELLER OF TALES	196
CHAPTER VIII	
THE GLADIATOR AS ARTIST	222
CHAPTER IX	
THE PERSONAL EQUATION	248



PREFACE

IT may be thought by some that this book demands an apology. Mr. G. K. Chesterton is still a young man, not much over thirty. In all reasonable probability much of his best work lies before him. His opinions may undergo a considerable change before he dies ; his style may develop ; he may attempt all sorts of new artistic experiments. Why, then, it may be asked, try to sum him up at a time when in the nature of things he cannot be summed up ? Why not wait till he is dead, perhaps till he has been dead for some twenty years, when the world will have decided whether he is really worth writing a book about at all ?

I admit the force of such arguments. But I submit that (waiving the point that if I waited till Mr. Chesterton were dead I might quite

probably be dead myself) there is something to be said on the other side, especially in the case of such a writer as Mr. Chesterton.

If a writer be a pure artist and aims solely at creating beautiful things, or, not to beg the "art for art's sake" controversy, at depicting the eternal things in beautiful forms, we can hardly wait too long before we judge him. But Mr. Chesterton is not and does not profess to be such an artist. / He is primarily a propagandist, the preacher of a definite message to his own time. He is using all the power which his literary capacity gives him to lead the age in a certain direction. It is surely important to consider, firstly, whether he has the power to lead it at all, and secondly, whether, if he does lead it, he is likely to lead it right or wrong. When dealing with such a man, especially when he has, as Mr. Chesterton undoubtedly has, great influence over many young and developing brains, it is as absurd to say that we ought to postpone discussing him till time has shown how far his fame will be per-

manent. As well might one suggest that Mr. Balfour should defer replying to a speech by Mr. Asquith till time has shown whether Mr. Asquith will be classed with Fox or with Addington. Discussing Mr. Chesterton is not a question of literary criticism ; it is a question of practical politics.

I have in the book itself disclaimed any intention of speculating on the durability of Mr. Chesterton's reputation. What is quite clear is that at the present moment he is profoundly influencing a great number of people. How far he is influencing them for good and how far for evil is surely a matter well worth discussing.

Mr. Kipling was worth discussing in the 'nineties quite apart from the permanence of his position in literature (in which personally I believe profoundly), because Mr. Kipling stood for Imperialism—a force to be reckoned with. Mr. Chesterton stands for Anti-Imperialism and for much else besides, for Catholicism with its back to the wall, for the hunger of a perplexed age,

for the more lucid life of the Ages of Faith, for the revolt against Modernity—in a word, for what may legitimately be called “reaction.” That word, which I use because it really conveys my meaning, may be used without the slightest moral bias. You cannot tell whether reaction is good or bad until you know what it is reacting against. To distinguish the good from the evil in Mr. Chesterton’s violent reaction against his age is partly the object of this book.

Another object is to estimate Mr. Chesterton’s value as a literary artist. This object naturally falls within the scope of the other, for Mr. Chesterton’s artistic talents are simply the weapons that he uses in his war against his controversial enemies. No doubt there are great chunks of his work that can be enjoyed frankly for their own sake without reference to his teaching ; but those little know G. K. C. who imagine that it was for their own sake that he enjoyed them.

I think that the time has just about arrived

when it is important that the modern world should make up its mind just what it does think of G. K. Chesterton. When a man, quite obviously in earnest, planks down a view of life unlike that of most of his contemporaries, it is silly to think you can dispose of him by calling him "paradoxical." He may be right or he may be wrong, or he may be (as he probably will be) partly right and partly wrong. If he is right, let us do all we can to strengthen his hands, and let us welcome his humour and fascination, not merely because they amuse us, but also because they are weapons to be used in the fight against the evil of our world. If he is wrong, let him be denounced, let him be, if you will, burnt as a heretic. But do not let him be praised as a buffoon. If he is partly right and partly wrong, it becomes a matter of urgent importance that we rightly distinguish his truths from his errors. Otherwise the tares may grow up and choke the wheat.

／ Buck, in dealing with Adam Wayne in "The

Napoleon of Notting Hill," was saner than most of Mr. Chesterton's readers. "He may be God. He may be the Devil. But we think it more likely as a matter of human probability that he is mad." If people said that about G. K. C. I should respect them. It would be better than calling him "paradoxical."

Another point upon which I may say an apologetic word or two is the free use which I have made of Mr. Chesterton's personal characteristics and private life to illustrate my view of his position. I do not think such action needs any excuse to sensible people. There may be men whose art work is a thing utterly separate from their personality. I do not know. I cannot conceive what they can be like ; but they may exist. One thing is certain. Mr. Chesterton is not such a man. To him thought and conduct are alike expressions of human personality. Whenever, therefore, circumstances have put me in possession of facts concerning Mr. Chesterton personally which may throw light upon the origin or

Preface

xv

development of his ideas, I have used them without scruple, so long as I could do so without violation of kindness or honour. To "good taste," the modern name for snobbery, I hope I am indifferent. Some people will probably blame me for this; but one person will not, I think, blame me, and that person is Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

G. K. CHESTERTON

A CRITICISM

CHAPTER I

ORIGINS

IT is a great deal easier," writes Mr. Chesterton in his study of Browning, "to hunt a family from tombstone to tombstone back to the time of Henry II, than to catch and realize and put upon paper that most nameless and elusive of all things—social tone." In studying Mr. Chesterton himself in his turn, it is as well to keep this very just opinion in mind. There is but little to be learned from what can be known of his ancestry; his heredity is a mixed one, but so probably is that of most middle-class Englishmen. One strand leads back to a burgher family.

of Aberdeen ; it gives G. K. C. his second name of " Keith," and can be traced back further than other lines, because it comes from a country where the *bourgeoisie* have all the family pride of a noblesse. There is also Swiss blood in his veins, and a legend of a great-great-grandfather buried while still alive in the trenches after the Battle of the Pyramids, dug out in consequence of an accidentally heard groan, and surviving to be a father and an ancestor. The Chestertons themselves seem to have been small landowners in Cambridgeshire until their fortunes were apparently dissipated by an Edward Chesterton, who flourished about the time of the Regency. Students of heredity may find in this gentleman the source of his descendant's literary turn, for his letters, still preserved in the family, and most dated from debtors' prisons, are models of polished eighteenth-century eloquence. His son, reacting to respectability became a coal - merchant, and subsequently founded an estate-agency business, which in th

fourth generation still flourishes. In this business Mr. Edward Chesterton, the father of the subject of this sketch, was a partner.

But all this tells us little. It is not important to know who Gilbert Chesterton's great-grandfather was. It is important to know in what sort of a home he grew up. It is important to understand the particular kind of educated middle-class household in which he passed his most impressionable years ; and you can only understand this by understanding the nineteenth century. I propose to approach G. K. C. after his own fashion, by means of a stupendous digression.

The Socialist writers and orators of the 'eighties (themselves almost exclusively drawn from the middle classes) were very fond of denouncing the middle class, or, as they generally called it, the *bourgeoisie*, for its stupidity, narrowness, and inaccessibility to ideas. Never was a charge more undiscerning. As a matter of fact, all the ideas, including Socialism, which were then fermenting in the minds of men came from the

middle class. It was, indeed, the only section of the community in which ideas as such had any chance of taking root.

“Geist,” as Matthew Arnold said long ago, “is forbidden by its nature to flourish in an aristocracy”; nor did our aristocracy, when it was vigorous and sincere, ever pretend to possess it. Of late years, it is true, an attempt has been made to defend our oligarchical system on the ground that it gives us a leisured class, able to devote itself wholly to the cultivation of the intellect. But, as a matter of fact, our European aristocracies never did so devote themselves, and, for my part, I am glad they did not. An intellectual aristocracy is the most horrible tyranny under which mankind can groan; I would rather, any day, be ruled by barons than by Brahmins. But whether it would be well to have such an aristocracy or not, it is quite certain that we have not got it and never have had it.

Our aristocrats were proud of being strong, of being brave, of being handsome, of being chivalrous

rous, of being honourable, of being happy, but never of being clever. The idea that brains were any part of the make-up of a gentleman was never dreamed of in Europe until our rulers fell into the hands of Hebrew moneylenders, who, having brains and not being gentlemen, read into the European idea of aristocracy an intellectualism quite alien to its traditions.

Nor have ideas ever had any better chance with the working classes. Even such ideas as they have borrowed from the middle class, because they suited their immediate class interests, have been de-intellectualized in the process. Socialism is a case in point. Socialism, as preached by its middle-class inventors, was an idea. In the form in which it has been adopted by a section of the labouring classes it is half sentiment, half eye-to-business. Its popularity is due partly to the trade unionist's desire for better wages and conditions of labour, partly to that ready sympathy and compassion for suffering which is the most beautiful of all the virtues of the English poor.

All this is, doubtless, both honourable and salutary. But if we wish to hear Socialism preached as an idea, we still have to go to Hyndman, to Belfort Bax, to Bernard Shaw, to H. G. Wells—in a word, to middle-class men.

Now, during the second half of the nineteenth century the middle class was absolutely bubbling over with ideas. It had just broken down the iron doors which since the seventeenth century had barred its escape from the prison of Calvinism. It was rioting in its new-found intellectual liberty as heartily as the men of the Restoration rioted in their new-found moral liberty. Everywhere you found households where new theories of politics, philosophy, religion, or science were eagerly welcomed, debated, and assimilated. Most of us have come across dozens of such households. Into such a household, on 29 May, 1874, G. K. C. was born.

His father was by profession a surveyor; by temperament something of a craftsman and something of a philosopher. Of his mother I

need only say that, though, so far as I know, she has never written a line for publication, anyone who wishes to know from whence G. K. C. gets his wit need only listen for a few minutes to her conversation.

The politics and religion of his parents were emphatically Liberal. That intellectual activity, that voracious curiosity of the mind, which I have endeavoured to suggest, was itself the product of the great Liberal movement. We, its children, have revolted against it—and often rightly—but still we are its children. No one, as I shall endeavour to show, is more typical of the revolt against it than Mr. Chesterton, but no one is more typically its child. It was a movement of destruction rather than of construction, of doubt rather than of faith. But a faith it had; for no movement can live without a faith. It believed, without question, in the right and power of the human mind, if left free, to judge the world. It proved all things, but because it felt assured that men would hold fast to that which was good.

In this atmosphere of free inquiry was developed a theology which was called undogmatic, because its dogmas were so simple and humane that they seemed to their exponents to be self-evident. The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the non-eternity of evil, the final salvation of all souls—these seemed to many in that era to form a faith at once sufficient and unassailable. Since then that free method of thought which created this system has largely destroyed it, forcing some of its children back to a more orthodox creed, others onward to a complete denial. But at that time thousands found rest in a vague but noble theo-philanthropy, such as G. K. C. absorbed in his youth. He was never made to read the Bible, and therefore read it—much to the advantage of his literary style. No one in the family was ever pressed to go to church, but, when they did go, it was to Bedford Chapel to hear the sermons of the Rev. Stopford Brooke. There, more than fifteen years ago, the young Chesterton learned from the lips of a

genuine poet and orator the whole of that system of religious thought which has been discovered by certain Nonconformist ministers within the last eighteen months, and is now emphatically called "The New Theology."

The politics of the family bore some resemblance to its religious atmosphere. They were not Jacobin, but they were decidedly Liberal. The childhood of G. K. C. coincided more or less with the St. Martin's Summer of Liberalism, from 1880 to 1885. Political controversy was so much in the air of the household that even as an infant he must have heard echoes of that last stand of Gladstonian Liberalism; he was certainly beginning to be politically conscious when the "flowing tide" in which Gladstone had trusted suddenly turned and overwhelmed him.

But though Mr. Chesterton must have been tolerably familiar with religious and political controversies almost before he could speak, it can hardly be supposed that he had developed ideas of his own on these subjects until well on

in his schooldays. He went to St. Paul's School when he was about twelve and stayed there some five years, interesting the more intelligent masters by his mental originality, and irritating the stupider ones by his refusal to take the routine of the place seriously. The records that one has of him during this period supply a picture of a tall, thin, rather good-looking boy, incredibly absent-minded (almost all the anecdotes of his boyhood turn on this trait), passionately fond of reading, covering all his school-books with drawings till the printing was unrecognizable, delightfully indifferent to ordinary school work, and quite equally indifferent to athletics.

The High Master of St. Paul's School at that time was Mr. F. W. Walker, a man who left a deep impress of his personality, not only on the school over which he presided, but also on the characters of all those who came in contact with him. He was one of those forceful characters that instinctively suggest greatness. He was, I believe, a very fine scholar ; he was certainly a

remarkable organizer, and the school, moulded by his hands, won triumph after triumph. But it was neither scholarship nor organizing capacity that one thought of in connection with him ; it was mere bigness and irresistible natural power. His head was leonine, and his voice, when raised in anger, was not unlike the roar of a lion. His geniality was scarcely less deafening than his wrath. His laughter, in particular, used to make the corridors rock, and it was currently believed that it could be heard at Hammersmith Broad-

way. I have sometimes wondered whether some reminiscence of his old High Master may be traced in Mr. Chesterton's description of the huge personality of the terrible "Sunday," just as old Paulines of his epoch will certainly recognize memories of one of the assistant masters in some of the humours of Auberon Quin.

Mr. Walker could be a sufficiently stern and even terrible disciplinarian when he liked, but he had in his nature vast reserves of good humour and tolerance. Also there was in him a touch of

unconventionality ; he lived the kind of life he liked, and not the kind of life a schoolmaster was expected to live. With a little change in his circumstances he might almost have been a Bohemian. He had a shrewd sense of human character and a keen eye to types of talent alien from his own. He always liked G. K. C. and prophesied great things of him, though the latter was, I fear, by no means a model pupil.

While at school he gained what was known as the "Milton" prize for English verse. It was considered a remarkable achievement, because that prize had been regarded hitherto as a monopoly of the "eighth," and G. K. C. was still in one of the lower forms. The subject of the poem (selected, of course, by the examiners) was "St. Francis Xavier." What G. K. C. made of that singularly unpromising theme I have forgotten—if I ever knew. But it served to direct attention to him as one who might do honour to the school, in spite of his somewhat casual treatment of his official studies.

But the most important event of his school career, so far as its influence on his own future is concerned, was undoubtedly the formation of the Junior Debating Club (or J.D.C.), of which he became chairman.

This remarkable institution, which has already given three journalists to the Liberal press, one excellent short story writer to the magazines, one parliamentary candidate to the Liberal Party, one professor to University College, and another to an educational institution in the Midlands, was founded, I believe, for the purpose of reading Shakespeare, but this intention was abandoned by general consent after the first meeting. It subsequently turned itself into a general debating society, and prospered so far as to be able to produce a monthly magazine called "The Debater," in which will be found numerous essays and poems, signed with the familiar initials "G. K. C."

Some of these contributions are extremely interesting. From the point of view of literary

merit the verse is certainly much better and maturer than the prose. Some of the poems are quite startlingly vigorous for a boy of sixteen, the best, I think, being the first ever printed—a soliloquy of Danton on the scaffold. Others are somewhat crude, and many of them frankly imitative. When one comes across a line like

As wholly a hideous dream from the gloom of the
gateway of Hell

one does not need to ask what poet the writer has just been reading. But the especial interest of these boyish verses lies in the light they throw upon their author's point of view at the time.

Most of them deal with religious and moral problems with all the sumptuous responsibility of extreme youth ; indeed, there is hardly a touch anywhere of the humour and fantasy of the later G. K. C. The old atmosphere of the faith of his childhood still remains, but the grip of its positive dogmas is weakening—he is leaning towards Agnosticism ; while, on the other hand, a note of pugnacity personal to himself has been

added to it. This note is struck with a certain force in a poem called "Ave Maria," written very obviously under the influence of Swinburne's style, and as obviously in a mood of revolt against Swinburne's teaching. It begins :

Hail Mary! Thou blest among women ; generations
shall rise up to greet,

After ages of wrangle and dogma, I come with a prayer
to thy feet.

Where Gabriel's red plumes are a wind in the lanes of
thy lilies at eve,

We pray, who have done with the churches ; we
worship, who may not believe!

The human origin of all religions is admitted,
but the argument is turned against the Neo-
Pagans effectively enough :

We know that men prayed to their image, and crowned
their own passions as Powers ;

We know that their Gods were as shadows, nor are
shamed of this Queen, that was ours !

We know as the people the priest is, as men are, the
Goddess shall be—

All harlots were worshipped in Cypris : all maidens and
mothers in thee !

He left school when about seventeen. His father, whose own tastes were far more literary and artistic than commercial, and whose judgment was sane and just to a most unusual degree, wisely refrained from attempting to force him into business. During his boyhood Gilbert Chesterton had been at least as fond of scribbling drawings as of scribbling verses. Some of these were thought by good judges to show great promise, and it was decided that he should study art. The experiment was not wholly a success. That Mr. Chesterton has considerable gift as a draftsman no competent critic who studies the illustrations to Mr. Belloc's "Immanuel Burden" will be disposed to deny. But it was not in that direction that his deepest impulses led. He proved this by the fact that he shrank from the technical toils of art as he has never shrunk from the technical toils of writing.

But the years during which this experiment was being made were certainly not wasted. During the whole time he was writing incessantly

and publishing practically nothing. He entered it crude and unformed ; he left it almost mature. These silent years were full of reading and of thinking. He was brought face to face with the modern world, the creation of that liberal philosophy in which he had been trained, and it failed to satisfy him. The disappointment, aggravated by his loathing for the decadent school which then dominated "advanced" literature, must have set him thinking. Perhaps it touched the nerve of humour in him, for we find little humour in what he wrote before this time, while in all that he wrote after it is dominant and clamorous. The change that came over his temperament was, perhaps, mirrored in his changed appearance. The tall, slender idealist became the full-girthed giant, shaking with Gargantuan laughter.

One reminiscence of his art-school days he gave to the world not long ago in a "Daily News" article. It may be worth recalling, firstly because it gives a glimpse of his impressions of the world he was then living in, secondly because it marks

the beginning of that change of view which we shall follow in future chapters, thirdly because Mr. Chesterton himself says that it was "by far the most terrible thing that ever happened to him in his life":

"An art school is different from almost all other schools or colleges in this respect; that, being of new and crude creation and of lax discipline, it presents a specially strong contrast between the industrious and the idle. People at an art school either do an atrocious amount of work or do no work at all. I belonged, along with other charming people, to the latter class; and this threw me often into the society of men who were very different from myself, and who were idle for reasons very different from mine. I was idle because I was very much occupied; I was engaged about that time in discovering, to my own extreme and lasting astonishment, that I was not an atheist. But there were others also at loose ends who were en-

gaged in discovering what Carlyle called (I think with needless delicacy) the fact that ginger is hot in the mouth.

“ I value that time, in short, because it made me acquainted with a good representative number of blackguards. In this connection there are two very curious things which the critic of human life may observe. The first is the fact that there is one real difference between men and women ; that women prefer to talk in twos, while men prefer to talk in threes. The second is that when you find (as you often do) three young cads and idiots going about together and getting drunk together every day you generally find that one of the three cads and idiots is (for some extraordinary reason) not a cad and not an idiot. In those small groups devoted to a drivelling dissipation there is almost always one man who seems to have condescended to his company ; one man who, while he can talk a foul triviality with his fellows, can also

talk politics with a Socialist, or philosophy with a Catholic.

“ It was just such a man whom I came to know well. It was strange, perhaps, that he liked his dirty, drunken society ; it was stranger still, perhaps, that he liked my society. For hours of the day he would talk with me about Milton or Gothic architecture ; for hours of the night he would go where I have no wish to follow him, even in speculation. He was a man with a long, ironical face, and close and red hair ; he was by class a gentleman, and could walk like one, but preferred, for some reason, to walk like a groom carrying two pails. He looked like a sort of super-jockey ; as if some archangel had gone on the Turf. And I shall never forget the half-hour in which he and I argued about real things for the first and the last time.”

The man asked him why he was becoming more orthodox, and was met by the now familiar

Chestertonian argument for religion and humility; illustrated by the symbol the sparks from the fire that was burning in front of them : "Seduce a woman, and that spark will be less bright. Shed blood, and that spark will be less red" :

"He had a horrible fairness of the intellect that made me despair of his soul. A common, harmless atheist would have denied that religion produced humility or humility a simple joy ; but he admitted both. He only said, 'But shall I not find in evil a life of its own ? Granted that for every woman I ruin one of those red sparks will go out ; will not the expanding pleasure of ruin . . .'"

" 'Do you see that fire ? ' I asked. 'If we had a real fighting democracy, some one would burn you in it ; like the devil-worshipper that you are.'

" 'Perhaps,' he said, in his tired, fair way. 'Only what you call evil I call good.'

"He went down the great steps alone, and I felt as if I wanted the steps swept and

cleaned. I followed later, and as I went to find my hat in the low, dark passage where it hung, I suddenly heard his voice again, but the words were inaudible. I stopped, startled; then I heard the voice of one of the vilest of his associates saying, 'Nobody can possibly know.' And then I heard those two or three words which I remember in every syllable and cannot forget. I heard the Diabolist say, 'I tell you I have done everything else. If I do that I shan't know the difference between right and wrong.' I rushed out without daring to pause; and as I passed the fire I did not know whether it was hell or the furious love of God.

"I have since heard that he died; it may be said, I think, that he committed suicide; though he did it with tools of pleasure, not with tools of pain. God help him, I know the road he went; but I have never known or even dared to think what was that place at which he stopped and refrained."

(Chesterton's)

A few of his writings found their way into print. While he was still at school, a poem of his called "A Song of Labour" was published in "The Speaker." To one of the fugitive artistic periodicals of the 'nineties, "The Quarto," he contributed a tale called "A Picture of Tuesday," which has a certain interest in that it anticipates one of the minor ideas of his latest novel. Then, while still an art student, he began to do a certain amount of art criticism for "The Bookman," and later attempted some reviewing for the same paper. Meanwhile, having abandoned art, he passed through the offices of two publishers, who probably found him something lacking on the commercial side of his duties. Finally, in 1900, he took the plunge into journalism.

But I am anticipating. Before I record Mr. Chesterton's entrance into the fields of journalism and literature I must say a word of the forces which had helped to mould him. Reading, no less than discussion, was in the air of his home, and from his childhood he was a voracious reader.

His memory was and is almost as astounding as Macaulay's, and he always had pages of his favourite authors stored in his head. His taste, then as now, was always for the romantic school. Shakespeare, Dickens, Scott (both prose and verse), Macaulay, were the writers he devoured, I think, most eagerly in his boyhood. I do not think that he gave much attention to contemporary or even to later Victorian writers. Swinburne caught him in his later schooldays ; Browning, I believe, later still ; Tennyson I do not fancy he ever fully appreciated. But just about the time that he was leaving school he met with a book which had a profound and decisive influence on the growth of his mind. That book was Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."

The effect which Whitman's poems produced on him was electric. They seemed to sum up the aspirations of his own youth. They gave him a faith to hold to, and a gospel to preach. He set himself to proclaim "the whole divine democracy of things," as he calls it in the "Wild

[Knight." He idealized the remnant of the J.D.C. into the Mystical City of Friends. He embraced passionately the three great articles of Whitman's faith, the ultimate goodness of all things implying the acceptance of the basest and meanest no less than the noblest in life, the equality and solidarity of men, and the redemption of the world by comradeship. You will find Whitman's influence everywhere present in his earlier work, especially in "The Wild Knight" and "The Defendant." The preface to "The Defendant" is instinct with his spirit. "The Wild Knight" itself is a Whitmanite poem; so is "Ecclesiastes"; so is "World Lover"; so is "The Earth's Shame." Other forces have since compelled him to modify the Whitmanite faith, and even to emphasize doctrines antagonistic to it—the existence of positive evil and the need of authority and definition. But the robust faith in life which Whitman drove into him he has never abandoned, and in the dedication of his latest book, "The Man who was Thursday," he pays

a fine tribute to Whitman's influence on his youth.

In another respect his opinions changed about this time, and the change is worth mentioning, although it was not permanent, and probably throws more light on the mental atmosphere of the time than on Mr. Chesterton's personal feelings and opinions. Hitherto, unlike his brother Cecil, who early rebelled against Liberalism, learned to hate the name of Gladstone before his own views were at all defined, and finally formulated his revolt in that particular brand of Tory-Socialism which he still, I believe, professes, Gilbert Chesterton had remained faithful to the family traditions in politics as in religion. The only point of departure was Home Rule, about which his father had doubts, but of which he was always a warm advocate. We shall see, I think, later how insignificant it was that he should have chosen this doubtful article of the Liberal creed for special championship. But for the present we are concerned with his temporary conversion to

Socialism. I do not think his grip on economic Socialism was ever very firm. I should be disposed to attribute his adoption of its tenets partly to the example of some of his J.D.C. friends who had gone to the University and joined the Oxford Fabian Society, partly to the indirect influence of Whitman, which coloured so much of his life during this period. For, though Whitman himself was an Anarchist rather than a Socialist, his influence on the Socialist movement was immense, and young Socialists talked continually the language of Whitmanism, preaching comradeship, equality, and good will among men—in a word, the very things which G. K. Chesterton was then intent on proclaiming.

However that may be, it is certain his Socialism left very little impression upon his mind. For some years he continued to call himself a Socialist. His first published poem was, in its general tendency, at least, a Socialist poem. He also wrote one or two poems and sketches for "The Clarion." But he took no active part in

the Socialist movement, and soon drifted out of it, silently but completely.

He was once more a Liberal. Indeed, even during his Socialist period, he had always believed in working with the Liberals. That fundamental Conservatism, which, as I shall endeavour to show, is the key to his maturer opinions, was even then strong with him, and, by a paradox as wild as any that he has propounded, it kept him and keeps him faithful to the Liberal party. From the time when he practically abandoned Socialism to the time when he emerged from obscurity into public fame, his political views may best be described as vaguely progressive. He believed in the ultimate amelioration of the human lot ; he believed (as he no longer believes) in Progress with a capital P ; he believed in liberty and democracy. But his views on many current issues were undefined. He was something of an Imperialist, as his poem, " An Alliance," in " The Wild Knight " proves. He was decidedly a patriot. He always, as I say, called himself a

Liberal. But his convictions had not been hammered into coherence by the necessities of battle.

Suddenly there came a change. Forces, moral ✓ and material, which had been gathering strength for years, appealed to the supreme arbitrament of the sword. Far to the South half a continent sprang to arms, and the heavy sleep of English politics was broken by a sound as of the Trumpets of Armageddon.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST PHASE

IN the autumn of the year 1899 no one outside his own circle had ever heard of G. K. Chesterton. In the spring of 1900 every one was asking every one else, "Who is 'G. K. C.'?" Before the year was over his name and writings were better known than those of men who had made reputations while he was still an infant. I do not know any example in the last fifty years of so dizzy a rise from obscurity to fame as that which I shall try to describe and analyze in this chapter.

His first serious publication (excluding a volume of nonsense verses called "Greybeards at Play") was "The Wild Knight," published at the beginning of 1900. How absolutely unknown was its author at that time may be gathered from one

rather amusing incident. Mr. James Douglas, in the "Star," concluded an enthusiastic review with the declaration that the new poet could be none other than Mr. John Davidson, writing under a pseudonym. Mr. Davidson promptly repudiated the suggestion, not without symptoms of considerable annoyance, and a denial not less emphatic, though somewhat more urbane, appeared over the signature of "Gilbert Chesterton."

But, though Mr. Chesterton thus claimed proprietary rights in his own name, that name remained comparatively unknown. "The Wild Knight," was, on the whole, well reviewed, and it drew warm praise from many competent judges—among others, from Mr. George Meredith. But commercially it was a failure, and it attracted comparatively little attention even from the minority who habitually read current poetry.

Nevertheless these early poems are particularly well worth studying. It is extraordinary that so able a critic as Mr. James Douglas should have

thought that they could be the work of Mr. John Davidson. It is true that there are some technical resemblances in the styles of the two poets. Both are daringly indifferent to poetic conventions; both use words and imagery shocking to critics of the classical school; both boldly introduce references to modern things—trains and lamp-posts. Both aim at vigour and strength rather than at beauty. But when we turn from the manner to the substance we find a philosophy farther removed from Mr. Davidson's than Mr. Davidson's is from Tennyson's or Wordsworth's.

The gospel of "The Wild Knight" and of nearly all the poems bound up with it is in essentials the gospel of Whitman. What, for instance, could be more in the spirit of "Leaves of Grass" than the poem called "Ecclesiastes"? I will quote it in full, not because I think it a good specimen from the literary point of view, but because it summarizes so succinctly the poet's early creed:

There is one sin : to call a green leaf grey,
Whereat the sun in heaven shuddereth.
There is one blasphemy : for death to pray,
For God alone knoweth the praise of death.

There is one creed : 'neath no world-terror's wing
Apples forget to grow on apple trees.
There is one thing is needful—everything—
The rest is vanity of vanities.

A much finer poem, "The Earth's Shame,"
I will also quote, because it emphasizes the Whit-
manite idea of the ultimate acceptance of all
things, however apparently evil :

Name not his deed : in shuddering and in haste
We dragged him darkly o'er the windy fells ;
That night there was a gibbet in the waste,
And a new sin in hell.

Be his deed hid from Commonwealths and Kings ;
By all men born be one true tale forgot ;
But three things, braver than all earthly things,
Faced him and feared him not.

Above his head and sunken secret face
Nestled the sparrow's young, and dropped not dead.
From the red blood and slime of that lost place
Grew daisies white, not red.

And from high heaven looking upon him,
Slowly upon the face of God did come
A smile that Cherubim and Seraphim
Hid all their faces from.

The religion of the poems, too, is Whitmanite. That is to say, it combines the almost contemptuous rejection of conscious dogmas with the assertion of unconscious dogmas of vast extent—dogmas quite unprovable, but so deeply impressed upon the soul of the believer that they seem to him self-evident. That the whole universe is the expression of a Supreme Will, that that Will is benign and full of love for its creatures, that all things are making for good—these doctrines are written on every page. But there is no trace of the writer's later sympathy for religious orthodoxy. The word "priest" is never used, save in the spirit of Whitman's—"Allons, from all formulas! From your formulas, O bat-eyed and materialistic priests!" The Founder of Christianity is praised to the point of worship as Whitman praised him, but historic Christianity

is almost everywhere represented as a ghastly parody of His teaching. In what is, perhaps, the most powerful poem in the book, "The Ballad of God-Makers," we are shown "the kings of the Earth" planning Christianity as a defence against Christ :

Said the King of the East to the King of the West
(I wot his frown was set),
'Lo, let us slay him—and make him as dung,
It is well that the world forget.'

Said the King of the West to the King of the East
(I wot his smile was dread),
'Nay, let us slay him—and make him a god,
It is well that our god be dead.'

They set the young man on a hill,
They nailed him to a rod ;
And there in darkness and in blood
They made themselves a god.

Here, then, we have a fairly coherent philosophy, which is practically the humane optimistic Modernism of Mr. Chesterton's up-bringing modified by the influence of Whitman, but retaining its main outlines undisturbed. In the

articles contributed to "The Speaker," some of the most characteristic of which were shortly afterwards published under the title of "The Defendant," much of that philosophy subsists. But there is a marked change—the first step in the transformation which was to turn the author of "The Ballad of God-Makers" into the author of "Heretics." To what was this change due? In order to answer that question, we must turn for a moment from private to public affairs. For it is a most significant fact, and one which had a profound effect upon his subsequent development, that it was a public crisis which first forced G. K. C. to the front.

The history of England during the last quarter of the nineteenth century is the history of the growth of Imperialism. That great movement, foreseen more than thirty years ago by the genius of Disraeli, was not to reach fruition in his time. The Manchester tradition in the middle class, the Radical-Chartist tradition in the most intelligent section of the working class, were still

too strong. It was not till the great Gladstonian age was over, till the Socialists had cut much ground from under the feet of the Radicals, and till Churchill and his Tory Democracy had created that alliance between the aristocracy and a large section of the proletariat which Disraeli had desired but had never been quite able to accomplish, that the ground was cleared for the new force.

It is not my business to discuss the merits or demerits of Imperialism. That it was often exploited by faithless politicians for frivolous, and by unscrupulous traders and financiers for sordid purposes, would be admitted by all its intelligent advocates. But whether it was wholly a gross materialistic and immoral movement is quite another matter. It showed that it had some roots in that part of the soul which is noble and aspirant by the one unfailing test—the fact that it produced literature which had the note of greatness. The stories and poems of Mr. Rudyard Kipling gave to the silent movement of public

sentiment and opinion an articulate voice, a voice at which the petty critics of the academies might carp, but to which no man with blood in his veins could refuse to listen. They summed up a movement; they roused an Empire. They did more than all the speeches of Mr. Chamberlain to raise the spirit of Imperialism to acting point. For good or evil, they made possible the South African War.

I am only concerned with these things in so far as they help to make clear the position of Mr. Chesterton, who was to do for the Anti-Imperialist reaction much of what Mr. Kipling had done for the Imperialist movement. First, then, let us see what it was that drove him into the camp of those who were called "Pro-Boers."

The young Chesterton had caught Imperialism as he had caught Socialism. Under its influence he wrote at least one poem, included in "The Wild Knight," which contains four lines such as even Mr. Kipling might have thought a trifle extravagant :

That all our seed be gathered,
 That all our race take hands,
 And the sea be a Saxon river,
 That flows through Saxon lands.

Moreover, he was a disciple of Stevenson; Stevenson was the only writer who could be said to compete with Whitman in forming the philosophy of his adolescence. Stevenson may not have been an Imperialist, but he had taught the gospel of the sword which was being vigorously invoked on behalf of Imperialism by his old friend and collaborator, Henley, and by a host of younger men who had learned it from him. Never at any time had the doctrine of Tolstoi, which has so powerfully influenced other British democrats, obtained the faintest hold on Mr. Chesterton. He was not in the least averse either to violence or to bloodshed in themselves. He was passionately patriotic, and detested all that modern theory which condemns flags and frontiers as inherently immoral. Everything seemed to point to the probability that he would be found on the Imperialist side in that fierce con-

troversy in regard to which hardly anyone found it possible to be impartial. How came it that he finally chose the other ?

Many minor causes might be suggested ; his traditional Liberalism, his sympathy with Irish Nationalism (which had remained unabated even when he half yielded to the Imperial idea), the example of most of his intimate personal friends. But I think the real cause lay deeper.

He interpreted the Stevensonian gospel of fighting in a manner altogether different from that of Mr. Henley and his school. Fighting was noble and romantic, but only if you fought against odds. Alan Breck at the round-house door was a figure to be admired, because he was one man against a ship's crew. But who thought Captain Hoseason romantic ? Yet the British Empire appeared to be rather in Hoseason's position than in Alan's. It was a fine thing that the weak should take the sword and conquer the strong. But here we were the strong, and we were endeavouring, without much success, to

conquer the weak. As he put it in a striking Christmas poem, written while the war was still raging :

Hard out of English bone my curse falls on an idle war,
That men of other blood have found the secret of the Star.

So, too, he interpreted differently the doctrine of Nationalism. Mr. Chesterton is, as I shall suggest, not always an entirely coherent thinker ; but he could think. And thinking was at a discount in the hot days of the war, when men snatched up the first fragment of doctrine they could lay their hands on if it seemed for the moment to tell in their favour. Thus Pro-Boers would denounce patriotism as an obsolete superstition, and then go on to praise the Boers for defending their country ! Similarly the Imperialists would alternately acclaim and decry national sentiment as it suited their turn. Now, Mr. Chesterton was one of the comparatively few people who had on the subject a clear and definable doctrine. He erected the sanctity of nationality into a religious dogma, and he denied

the right of any nation or Empire, on the pretence of being more civilized, more progressive, more democratic, or more efficient, to take away from another nation its birthright of independence. This creed he was prepared to defend alike against Imperialist and Cosmopolitan critics.

His conviction was probably defined and intensified by the appearance of a school of political thinkers who were prepared to defend Imperialism on the specific ground that it was opposed to Nationalism. This was the position taken up by Mr. Bernard Shaw and other Fabian leaders, and Mr. Chesterton has always maintained that it is the only logical ground upon which Imperialism can be defended. And so, no doubt, it would be if human institutions and the sentiments which gather round them were as immutable and as strictly definable as the lines and angles of Euclid. It is not, however, my business here to debate the issue, but merely to point out that the Fabian defence of Imperialism tended to confirm Mr. Chesterton in his growing conviction that Im-

perialism was the mortal enemy of patriotism. On that paradox most of his political philosophy is built.

This thesis is the subject of the last essay in "The Defendant"—"A Defence of Patriotism." It is still further developed in the first essay in a volume called "England a Nation," which was produced by an institution calling itself "The Patriots' Club." The Patriots' Club was Mr. Chesterton's own idea; its aim was to provide a rallying point for those who disapproved alike of the Cosmopolitan and the Imperialist ideals. It never did anything as far as I know except to produce the aforesaid volume, which contained contributions from persons as diverse and typical as Mr. Masterman, Mr. Ensor, Mr. Hugh Law, M.P., Mr. Nevinson, Mr. Hammond, Mr. Reginald Bray, and the Rev. Conrad Noel on various aspects of the Nationalist doctrine. Mr. Chesterton himself wrote the introductory essay on "The Patriotic Idea," which contains perhaps the most lucid expression of the political dogma

which has exercised so dominant an influence over his opinions. It opens with an attack upon the Cosmopolitan ideals, based upon the refusal of their humanitarianism to recognize the common needs of humanity :

“ Because the modern intellectuals who disapprove of patriotism do not do this, a strange coldness and unreality hangs about their love for men. If you ask them whether they love humanity, they will say, doubtless sincerely, that they do. But if you ask them touching any of the classes that go to make up humanity, you will find that they hate them all. They hate kings, they hate priests, they hate soldiers, they hate sailors, they distrust men of science, they denounce the middle classes, they despair of working men, but they adore humanity. Only they always speak of humanity as if it were a curious foreign nation. They are dividing themselves more and more from men to exalt the strange race of mankind. They are

ceasing to be human in the effort to be
[humane.”

Then comes the turn of the Imperialists. The attack is directed mainly against the contention that “a great conglomeration of peoples like the British Empire may be a unification of varied merits.” Mr. Chesterton meets this with a denial: empires do not absorb the great qualities of the races they subdue:

“ . . . Why did we know so much about German mythology and nothing about Irish mythology? Any person with even the simplest knowledge of the world as it is must realize that the reason lies in the fact that our material conquest of Ireland put us in an utterly artificial position towards everything Irish. The Irish would not sing to us any more than the Jews, as described in their stern and splendid psalm, would sing to the Babylonians. I find it difficult to believe that there can be anyone so ignorant of

practical existence as not to know that any attempt on the part of the Irish for centuries after their conquest to say to us what they had to say about their history and legends would have been met with nothing except jokes about Brian Baroo. We all know in reality that England would never have consented to learn from Ireland. It has learnt from France because it failed to conquer her. If Edward III or Henry V had succeeded in adding France to the Empire, we may be absolutely certain that we should have learnt as little from the song of Roland as we have from the legend of Maive, and that we should have profited as little from the genius of Mirabeau as we did from the genius of Parnell."

Perhaps the best passage in the essay is that which deals with the fugitive native character of empires and the permanence of nations:

"Spain had once a colonial empire, far

more brilliant and original than ours. Its empire has vanished, but there are still men who will die for Spain ; there are still men who will strike you in the face if you say that they are not Spaniards.

“ France had an empire covering all Europe after the great ecstasy of the Revolution. It vanished utterly, and all its ideas are at a low ebb in Europe. But there are still men who will die for France. And when from our mortal nation also this immortal fallacy is passed, when all the colonies of England have gone the wild way of the colonies of Spain, when some strange and sudden Waterloo has made the little dream of Beaconsfield as mad as the great dream of Napoleon, something will remain, I am very certain, which matters more than all these levities. There will still be men who will die for England.”

Mr. Chesterton is by no means on such strong ground when he appeals to the common sense of

humanity as distinguishing between Imperialism and Patriotism. Indeed, here I think is the weak point in his case. He is always appealing to us to ask what the great mass of ordinary men want. Now, there can be no manner of doubt what the great mass of ordinary men wanted in the year 1899. They wanted the South African War and the annexation of the Dutch Republics. And they wanted it in the name of Patriotism. If anyone had told them that such a desire was unpatriotic they would have replied, as Mr. Chesterton replies to the imaginary humanitarian in "Heretics": "What a great deal of trouble you must have taken in order to feel like that." And they would have said so, six years later even, when they were in a mood of reaction against Imperialism. The ordinary man, the balancing elector, who voted Conservative in 1900 because he liked Imperialism, and Liberal in 1906 largely because he had grown to dislike it, would not have said in 1906 any more than in 1900 that Imperialism was unpatriotic. He would have

said : " Patriotism is all very well, but I think you can have too much of it." And I think he would have been right. To say that an Imperialist is deficient in patriotism because he does not respect other people's *patria* seems to me like saying that a selfish man is deficient in egoism because he does not respect other people's *ego*.

On the eve of the war "The Speaker," then the leading Liberal weekly, passed practically into the hands of a group of young Liberals fresh from the Universities, who were resolved to make it the organ of vigorous opposition to the New Imperialism. Among these were several of Mr. Chesterton's old J.D.C. friends, and to the combination he readily lent the aid of his pen. The now-familiar initials "G. K. C." appeared at the bottom of several articles and reviews. And then, as I have already said, every one began to ask every one else, "Who is 'G. K. C.'?" In a few months he was almost famous.

What was it in these articles which struck the imagination of the reading world and captured

its attention as by a cavalry charge ? It was not, I think, merely the cleverness of the writing. There are many clever writers who do not find so easy a victory. Nor was it any astonishing originality in the views expressed. The really individual opinions of the author were then only struggling into being. He said little that might not have been said, comparatively little that had not been said, by Whitman or Stevenson or some other hero of his youth. Yet every one felt that he was striking a new note. J

That note, I think, was the note of pugnacity. ✓
The opinions expressed may have been expressed before, may even be pretty generally accepted, but he throws into each a note of challenge. He writes, not like an essayist weaving a fascinating theory, but like a political leader with his eye on the division lobby. He sees his adversary ; he sees his audience. He fights like a man fighting to win. J

Let me take a single instance—the “ Defence of Penny Dreadfuls,” subsequently reprinted in

"The Defendant." The idea that Penny Dreadfuls are defensible is one that might have occurred to any paradoxical essayist. We can imagine Mr. Max Beerbohm producing a very delightful phantasia on such a theme on the lines of his attack on the Fire Brigade. Stevenson might have treated it a little more seriously, as in "The Lantern Bearers." But it is safe to say that neither they nor anyone else would have treated it as it is treated here. Mr. Chesterton defends Penny Dreadfuls—not ironically, not with a half-serious, romantic sympathy, but as if he were the counsel retained to defend a man accused of selling them !

He begins quietly enough, pointing out a perfectly fair logical distinction between the desire of artistic people for artistic fiction and the desire of all normal men for stories. The latter desire is as legitimate as the former, and we ought not to condemn the story-teller merely because he does not produce a good work of art. "Bad story-telling is not a crime.

Mr. Hall Caine walks the streets openly and cannot be put in prison for an anti-climax." Later he warms to his work, and begins to distribute powerful forensic blows right and left. "If some grimy urchin runs away with an apple, the magistrate shrewdly points out that the child's knowledge that apples appease hunger is traceable to some curious literary researches." The evidence of the readers of these stories that they have been led into crime is brushed aside just as a clever barrister would brush it aside. "If I had forged a will, and could obtain sympathy by tracing the incident to the influence of Mr. George Moore's novels, I should find the greatest entertainment in the diversion." Another stroke rapidly follows: "At any rate, it is firmly fixed in the minds of most people that gutter-boys, unlike everybody else in the community, find their principal motives for conduct in printed books."

Then, after the introduction of "Rob Roy" and "Ivanhoe" as precedents for the sympa-

thetic treatment of criminals, comes the really sensational effect, for the sake of which one feels the article was written. The tables are turned on the prosecution. The accusers of Penny Dreadfuls are themselves put in the dock :

“ If the authors and publishers of ‘ Dick Deadshot ’ and such remarkable works were suddenly to make a raid upon the educated class, were to take down the names of every man, however distinguished, who was caught at a University Extension Lecture, were to confiscate all our novels and warn us all to correct our lives, we should be seriously annoyed. Yet they have far more right to do so than we ; for they, with all their idiotcy, are normal and we are abnormal. It is the modern literature of the educated, not of the uneducated, which is avowedly and aggressively criminal. Books recommending profligacy and pessimism, at which the high-souled errand boy would shudder,

lie upon all our drawing-room tables. If the dirtiest old owner of the dirtiest old book-stall in Whitechapel dared to display works really recommending polygamy or suicide, his stock would be seized by the police. These things are our luxuries. And with a hypocrisy so ludicrous as to be almost unparalleled in history, we rate the gutter-boys for their immorality at the very time that we are discussing (with equivocal German Professors) whether morality is valid at all. At the very instant that we curse the Penny Dreadful for encouraging thefts upon property, we canvass the proposition that all property is theft. At the very instant we accuse it (quite unjustly) of lubricity and indecency, we are cheerfully reading philosophies which glory in lubricity and indecency. At the very instant that we charge it with encouraging the young to destroy life, we are placidly discussing whether life is worth preserving."

You will find that sense of being at grips with a real or imaginary enemy in nearly everything that Mr. Chesterton has written. It permeates his criticisms and reviews, his poems, and even (in defiance of artistic canons) his stories. In the old "Speaker" articles it is particularly prominent. The very title of "The Defendant" bears witness to it, but it is by no means confined to the articles that were thought worth reprinting. All subjects are alike to him, if only a fight can be extracted from them. Those who think that the South African War was justifiable are not subjected to a fiercer fire than those who think that Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays. We see him laughing, like the war-horse in Job, at the shaking of the spears, dealing thwacking blows with enormous enjoyment and good humour, keeping a dozen controversies going at once as a juggler keeps billiard balls.

It is the combative spirit which has been from the first apparent in Mr. Chesterton which has led to his being labelled "paradoxical." The

term may be suffered to pass, but it must be insisted that there is no affinity between Mr. Chesterton's paradoxes and those polished inversions which Oscar Wilde brought into fashion.

Wilde's paradoxes were purely artistic products fashioned solely for the sake of their own wit, neatness, and humour. "Divorces are made in Heaven," is a typical and very admirable specimen. The phrase is intended to startle and amuse, but certainly not to provoke thought, much less controversy. It is wholly self-sufficient, a perfect work of art, which further elaboration, above all, anything in the nature of argument, would utterly spoil. Finally, it has no reference to the serious philosophy of Wilde or of anybody else. Now, Mr. Chesterton occasionally indulges in inversions of this type—"a good bush needs no wine" and "nothing fails like success." He is not, I think, very successful in inventing these phrases—certainly no one would think of comparing them with Wilde's exquisite inventions. But the difference lies deeper than any question of

relative merit. The difference is one of aim. Wilde's paradoxes would, as I say, be spoilt altogether by explanation. But the whole value—indeed, the whole meaning—of the expressions quoted above lies in the explanation which accompanies them. They are not toys fashioned and tossed about at random. They are shots fired in a campaign.

The typical Chestertonian paradox consists not in the inversion of a proverb, but in the deliberate presentation of some unusual and unpopular thesis with all its provocative features displayed, with all the consequences which are likely to startle or anger opponents insisted on to the point of wild exaggeration. It is unnecessary to give instances, for almost every essay that Mr. Chesterton has written is an instance. That on Rudyard Kipling in "Heretics" is perhaps one of the strongest. Mr. Chesterton does not gently suggest, as another writer of his opinions would have done, that Mr. Kipling's patriotism is not of the highest and purest type. He boldly flings down the

statement that a complete absence of patriotism is his dominant characteristic. Closely connected with this provocative method of attack is a marked refusal to present his own position in pleasing or soothing colours, a determination that his opponents shall miss nothing in it that they will dislike. This peculiarity perhaps lends some colour to Mr. Shaw's suggestion that Mr. Chesterton is French. For Frenchmen often display that fierce refusal to disguise the ugly parts of their creed. Where, for instance, an English Free-thinker would say: "The human reason will give men better and truer illumination than the outworn lamps of theology," the French Free-thinker exclaims: "With a superb gesture we have put out in Heaven the lights that shall never be lighted again!" Despite the complete antagonism of doctrine, there is something very Chestertonian about that defiant outburst.

Later an incident occurred which gave him a new opportunity and a wider public. At the beginning of the South African War the "Daily

Chronicle," under the editorship of Mr. Massingham, was the principal Pro-Boer organ ; while the "Daily News," under Mr. Cook, was the organ of the Liberal Imperialists. Later the two papers changed sides. The proprietors of the "Daily Chronicle" supplanted Mr. Massingham by an Imperialist editor, and subsequently a syndicate of wealthy Radicals bought the "Daily News" and ousted Mr. Cook. The new "Daily News" was naturally anxious to enlist all the talent that was available for opposing the Imperialist war policy, and the eyes of its proprietors and editors naturally turned to G. K. C. Then began that series of Saturday articles which have continued without a break ever since.

Every one, I think, must have been struck by the incongruity of Mr. Chesterton's weekly appearance in the "Daily News." The insertion of a story by Guy de Maupassant in the "Christian Herald" would hardly seem more fantastic. The fact is that the accident of concurrence on the overmastering issue of the war

(and even on that the conclusion was reached by wholly different roads) had thrown G. K. C. into the company of those who had really least in common with him. The strong loyalty of old ties and old associations which is characteristic of him has kept him faithful to the "News," with the result that he is almost the only writer of the day who has the ear of his adversaries, whose congregation is, indeed, almost wholly composed of his adversaries. Generally speaking, people buy the papers that express their own views, and find therein the articles of people who agree with them. But the odd accident of Mr. Chesterton's connection with the "Daily News" provides a notable exception. Thousands of peaceful semi-Tolstoian Nonconformists have for six years been compelled to listen every Saturday morning to a fiery apostle preaching consistently the praise of the three things which seem to them most obviously the signs-manual of Hell—War, Drink, and Catholicism.

Shortly afterwards Mr. Chesterton collected

another volume of his articles and published them under the title of "Twelve Types." The book is interesting, as I shall show in another chapter, as indicating a further movement of his mind away from the philosophy of "The Wild Knight" and towards the philosophy of "Heretics." It is also interesting as the first publication which exhibits him as a critic. To call it a book of criticism would, however, be a complete misnomer. In most of the essays there is really hardly any criticism properly so called. What Mr. Chesterton does is merely to put forward his own views with immense vigour and pugnacity, using the views of some other man as a foil. It is not criticism; but it is immensely entertaining.

All this time his interest in politics continued unabated. It was not only in prose that he assailed the current political philosophy of the day. Week after week verses, terse and vigorous and charged with the fiercest irony or indignation, appeared in "The Speaker" from his pen.

One of these is a defiance launched at the disturbers of Pro-Boer meetings. Another, in a different vein, is a metrical version of Mr. Chamberlain's election speech. I will quote two verses of it, because it is a good specimen of the kind of *jeu d'esprit* which G. K. C. can do extraordinarily well when he chooses :

At Birmingham among my own
Dear People I appear.
For I was born at Camberwell,
Not very far from here ;
And, if you choose another man,
My public life is closed ;
But you will find it difficult,
Since I am unopposed.

Have we not armies at the front
That we can turn to mobs,
Which out of love for me have shown
Some deference to " Bobs " ?
They're sensitive, and, if they heard
Their Joseph had been hissed,
They'd have no nerve to meet the foe
That does not now exist !

In marked contrast to this charming absurdity

is the almost brutal violence of the poem written on the morrow of the General Election, with its torrent of bitter taunts :

Never so low as this we blundered. X

Dead we have been ; but not so dead
As these, that live on the life they squandered,
As these, that drink of the blood they shed.

We never boasted the thing we bungled,
We never flaunted the thing that fails,
We never quailed from the living laughter
To howl to the dead who tell no tales.

'Twas another finger at least that pointed
Our wasted men and our empty bags,
It was not we who sounded the trumpet
In front of the triumph of wrecks and rags !

Altogether, then, the pen of G. K. C. was pretty well occupied during the three years of the war. He fought hard for his side, and he has left on record only recently his memories of the contest. In a poem in the "Daily News" on last year's London County Council election he wrote :

I dream of the days when work was scrappy,
And rare in our pockets the mark of the mint ;

When we were angry and poor and happy,
And proud of seeing our names in print.
For so they conquered, and so we scattered,
When the Devil rode, and his dogs smelt gold,
And the peace of a harmless folk was shattered,
When I was twenty and odd years old.
When mongrel men that the market classes,
Had slimy hands upon England's rod;
And sword in hand upon Afric's passes,
Her last Republic cried to God!

The three years of war mark the three years of Mr. Chesterton's journalistic apprenticeship. When it began in 1899 he was still a beginner. Its last embers had not been stamped out when Mr. John Morley asked him to do for the "English Men of Letters" series a monograph on Browning.

With the publication of that book he definitely passes from journalism to literature.

CHAPTER III

A CRITIC OF LETTERS

I HAVE taken the publication of his "Robert Browning" as the point at which Mr. Chesterton definitely enters the world of permanent, as distinguished from ephemeral, letters. This entrance was accompanied by much the same buzz of curiosity, excitement, and admiration as greeted his growing reputation as a journalist, but with this difference, that the dissentient voices were now louder and more numerous, so that blame and even violent denunciation were more freely mingled with the enthusiasm of praise.

It was natural that it should be so, nor would it be fair to attribute the attitude of his most hostile critics to personal motives of spite or jealousy. Such motives may have operated in

some cases—indeed, they are the inevitable price of so sudden and startling a success. But in the great majority of instances the irritation of his critics was quite natural and intelligible.

Mr. Chesterton had served his apprenticeship in journalism, and even among journalists—at any rate, among what may be called literary journalists—his manner had seemed almost provocatively journalistic. He now entered on a new career as a man of letters. In that there is nothing unusual; many men have graduated in Fleet Street for the salons of literature. But what many thought almost indecent was the extent to which the neophyte seemed to be at ease in the intellectual and artistic Zion which ought to have put him on his best behaviour.^{*} He walks into its holy places (metaphorically speaking) with his hat on, and utterly refuses to be impressed with its dignity or his own unworthiness. He does not modify or subdue his riotous journalistic style; what was good enough for the readers of “The Speaker” and the “Daily News” ought to be

good enough for the students of literature. At any rate, it is all he has to give them, and if they do not like it they can leave it. ✓ They did not like it, but to leave it was no easy matter, for the most hardened academic could not disguise from himself the fact that these extraordinary books of criticism which violated every canon of literary decency were uproariously readable.

The cause of their pre-eminence in this respect is identical with the cause of their irritant effect on the epicures of art—they are the work of a journalist, and a journalist must be readable or perish. Of course, in these books, as, for the matter of that, in his purely journalistic work, Mr. Chesterton is much more than readable—he ✕ is often profound, nearly always forcible, generally suggestive. But the fact that struck the world as startling in a solid piece of literary criticism and appreciation was not that it should be profound, forcible, or suggestive, but that by some strange portent it should actually be readable.

I have said that in approaching serious criticism Mr. Chesterton made no change in his method of writing. There is, indeed, in the "Browning" ample indication that the author is writing with more care and conscience than he gave to his weekly contributions to the Press.^κ But the only effect of this is that what he has been doing all along he now does better. The brilliance is better sustained, the effects are better prepared, but it is the same kind of brilliance, the same kind of effect.

^κYou can hardly turn to any page of the "Browning" without lighting on a passage which you can no more imagine occurring in any other volume of the "English Men of Letters" series than you can imagine a rowdy, topical song occurring in one of Racine's Tragedies. For instance, Mr. Chesterton wishes to contrast the obscurity of Mr. George Meredith, which arises from the subtilty and complexity of the ideas to be expressed, with the obscurity of Browning, which is due to a sort of swift im-

patience. The distinction is a sound and a valuable one. But who but Mr. Chesterton would have dared to illustrate it by making up imaginary descriptions of a man being knocked downstairs in the styles of the two great writers ? Who, again, would have ventured to translate a passage from Tennyson into Browningese, and a passage from Browning into Tennysonese, to show the suitability of their respective styles to their respective subjects ? These are no isolated instances ; the same defiance of literary conventions runs through the whole of the " Browning," and is hardly less marked in the later monograph on Dickens.

Lord Macaulay prided himself on having destroyed " the dignity of history," and it may be that, when sufficient time has passed to enable men to weigh fairly his merits and defects, that service will remain his greatest and most permanent title to gratitude. In the same way Mr. Chesterton might not unfairly claim to have helped to destroy the equally pernicious " dignity

of literary criticism." Of both Macaulay and Mr. Chesterton it may be said that they never omit an anecdote or a reference which may help to make the impression more vivid because the anecdote or reference is in itself trivial or grotesque. Macaulay at the most exciting crisis of the Revolution does not forget to remind us that Charles II said of the Prince of Denmark "that he had tried him drunk and he had tried him sober, and that, drunk or sober, there was nothing in him." Similarly Mr. Chesterton introduces into a book of grave criticism such stories as that of the lady who, meeting Robert Browning at dinner and ignorant of his identity, asked: "Who is that too exuberant stockbroker?" He has his reward. Doubts may exist as to the correctness of the judgments passed in the "Browning" and the "Dickens." But there can be no doubt about the amazing graphic vigour of the portraiture.

In these violations of academic orthodoxy Mr. Chesterton is abundantly justified by the result.

But more valid objection may be taken to another habit which he had acquired in journalism and which he continued to use in his books—the habit of illustrating his thesis by references to obviously ephemeral phenomena in life or literature. In the “Browning,” for example, we find the obscurity of the poet illustrated by a reference to Miss Marie Corelli. In the “Dickens” the popularity of the novelist is contrasted with the popularity of Mr. William Le Queux. Now, in a “Daily News” article such references would be perfectly defensible, for such an article is only intended to be ephemeral, and it may fairly be assumed that every one who reads it has heard of the two authors referred to. But a serious study of a great man like Robert Browning or Charles Dickens ought to aim at permanence. It should be written with an eye on that posterity which will certainly read Browning and Dickens, and which is hardly likely to be familiar with Miss Corelli or Mr. Le Queux. If they read Mr. Chesterton, they will necessarily find these pas-

sages as unintelligible as we find the obscurest parts of the "Dunciad." The same objection applies to the frequent reference to the transient fashions of politics which meets us on almost every page. These things must tend to hinder the books from being what in many ways they deserve to be—durable monuments of a durable fame.

Another criticism commonly brought against Mr. Chesterton's critical works has reference to the digressions in which they abound. Here, I think, a distinction must be made. Mr. Chesterton's habit of creating before he draws a man's portrait an impression of the forces which have moulded him, and the background against which he is to be relieved, appears to me wholly admirable. To do this intelligently and effectively it may be necessary to go back to very remote origins, and discuss problems apparently far removed from the immediate subject of study. Many of the greatest and most perfect architects of letters—Newman, for example, and Burke—

do this constantly, and where Mr. Chesterton does it he is often at his best. We could ill spare the admirable analysis of the temper of the nineteenth century which introduces the little monograph on Watts, or the presentation of the angry yet optimistic Radicalism of the 'thirties in the "Dickens." These passages are not only good in themselves; they are good in their places, and they make the whole work better, more intelligible, and more complete. x

But Mr. Chesterton does undoubtedly from time to time indulge in a kind of digression which is not so easy to defend. Every now and then some comparatively unimportant incident or remark which he thinks it necessary to chronicle will remind him of an issue quite irrelevant to his subject, but supremely interesting to himself. When this happens he frequently deserts his subject without scruple, and begins what is in effect an entirely independent essay on the issue raised. |

Several examples of this tendency will be found in the "Browning." Mr. Chesterton has to

chronicle that Browning was very fond of Italy, and that he and his wife went to live there. But the mention of Italy in the 'forties immediately calls up memories of the struggle for Italian liberty which was then commencing. The subject fires his blood, and he goes ahead for five pages, recalling the French Revolution, the victories of Napoleon, the triumph of the Holy Alliance, and the ultimate break-up of "the frozen continent of non-possumus" which that triumph established. It is very fine writing—perhaps one of the finest passages in the book—but what light does it throw on Robert Browning? Had Mr. Chesterton been writing a study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning I would not have complained; for Mrs. Browning celebrated the struggle for Italian freedom and unity in some of her noblest poems, and a full understanding of her would be impossible without some comprehension of the cause into which she threw so much of her energy. Browning as a private citizen may have shared her sympathies, but so far as his work

the history
of the nation
are as in
the

is concerned, the movement might never have existed. That it influenced the bent of his mind or genius in any way is not obvious, nor does Mr. Chesterton make any attempt to show that it did so. He is writing about the Italian Revolution, not because it affected Robert Browning, but because it affects G. K. Chesterton. The whole passage is in reality a "Daily News" article on "Garibaldi" which has accidentally got into the wrong place.

In order to understand properly the peculiar traits of Mr. Chesterton's books of criticism there is another fact to be borne in mind. Just as he was a journalist before he was an author, so he was a writer on philosophical questions before he was a critic. His early reviews in "The Speaker" and "Daily News" use the particular book under discussion only as a peg on which to hang some general doctrine. This will be seen very clearly in the "Twelve Types." That volume contains studies of some of the most interesting figures in literary history—Pope,

Byron, Carlyle, Scott, Charlotte Brontë, Tolstoy, Stevenson, and William Morris. Yet hardly one of them deals exhaustively with the literary quality or position of the author, and several of them are random essays on some theme suggested by the author's name.

The worst case of this is the essay on Byron—the worst essay, I think, that Mr. Chesterton has ever written. Byron is an almost ideally fruitful subject for serious criticism and appreciation. In that most remarkable artistic insurrection which overthrew the dynasty of Pope, and made possible the whole school of naturalistic poets from Shelley to Kipling, he occupies a unique place—a place analogous to that filled by Erasmus in the Reformation and by Mirabeau in the French Revolution. He saw the need of a change, but he would have made it a constitutional one. He would have relaxed the extreme rigours of the classical school, brought it into closer touch with nature, fulfilled it with new energy and passion. But he would have left its fundamental

principles unquestioned, its gods undethroned, its permanent tradition unbroken. Of all this there is not a hint in Mr. Chesterton's essay. As little realization is there of the immense importance of Byron to European thought as the Liberal aristocrat with the Liberal's hatred of despotism and an aristocrat's hatred of authority, whose voice ringing through Europe told the banded kings that the Revolution had been conquered too late. All that Mr. Chesterton has to say about Byron is that he was not a pessimist, but an optimist, because he enjoyed his own poetry! There is just about enough truth and value in this to justify a single epigram. Spread thin over fourteen pages, it produces a sense of intense and quite justifiable irritation.

Nevertheless, "Twelve Types" gives pregnant hints of unused powers as a critic. Two of the essays—those on Charlotte Brontë and Scott—are real criticism, so far as they go, and extraordinarily illuminating and convincing, though they are rather sketches of their subjects taken

from one particular angle than exhaustive studies of them. In some of the others there are phrases and sentences full of insight. The following description of the literary quality of Tolstoy's stories is almost perfect :

“ The curious cold white light of morning that shines over all the tales, the folk-lore simplicity with which ‘ a man or a woman ’ is spoken of without further identification, the love—one might almost say the lust—for the qualities of brute materials, the hardness of wood and the softness of mud, the ingrained belief in a certain ancient kindliness sitting beside the very cradle of the race of man—these influences are truly moral.”

In that there is the quick eye for essentials which is the first quality of a good critic.

✚ And, indeed, when Mr. Chesterton allows himself to be a critic pure and simple, he is always good. If some of his critical efforts have been

failures, it has not been from any defect in the critical faculty, but rather from that permanent temptation of his to leave the work of criticism for that of philosophizing which becomes irresistible when the philosophy of the author under consideration is in violent conflict with his own. He is always at his best when he is analyzing a writer with whose root point of view he is sympathetic. No critic ever had a keener sense of Wordsworth's maxim that "style is the sacrament of thought." This sense, which gets in his way when he is discussing a writer whose view of life he does not understand, helps him when he is dealing with a sympathetic mind. For then he can not only give free play to his remarkable power of selecting truly and describing vividly the external qualities of an artist, but he can see these externals in the light of the author's conscious or sub-conscious intention.

I think I can best illustrate this by a quotation from his solitary essay in the criticism of painting, the monograph on Watts. He has been repudia-

ting the suggestion that the mysticism of Watts is "Celtic," and has for this purpose been contrasting him with Burne-Jones :

"It is remarkable that even the technical style of Watts gives a contradiction to this Celtic theory. Watts is strong precisely where the Celt is weak, and weak precisely where the Celt is strong. The only thing that the Celt has lacked in art is that hard mass, that naked outline, that ἀρχιτέκτων which makes Watts a sort of sculptor of draughtsmanship. It is as well for us that the Celt has not had this : if he had, he would rule the world with a rod of iron ; for he has everything else. There are no hard black lines in Burke's orations, or Tom Moore's songs, or the plays of Mr. W. B. Yeats. Burke is the greatest of political philosophers, because in him only are there distances and perspectives, as there are on the real earth, with its mists of morning and

evening, and its blue horizons and broken skies. Moore's songs have neither a pure style nor deep realization, nor originality of form, nor thought nor wit nor vigour, but they have something else which is none of these things, which is nameless and the one thing needful. In Mr. Yeats' plays there is only one character, the hero who rules and kills all the others, and his name is Atmosphere. Atmosphere and the gleaming distances are the soul of Celtic greatness as they were of Burne-Jones, who was, as I have said, weak precisely where Watts is strong, in the statuesque quality in drawing, in the love of heavy hands like those of *Mammon*, of a strong back like that of *Eve Repentant*, in a single fearless and austere outline like that of the angel in *The Court of Death*, in the frame-filling violence of *Jonah*, in the half-witted brutality of *The Minotaur*. He is deficient, that is to say, in what can only be called the god-like materialism of art. Watts,] ✓

on the other hand, is peculiarly strong in it. Idealist as he is, there is nothing frail or phantasmal about the things or the figures he loves. Though not himself a robust man, he loves robustness ; he loves a great bulk of shoulder, an abrupt bend of neck, a gigantic stride, a large and swinging limb, a breast bound as with bands of brass. Of course, the deficiency in such a case is very far from being altogether on one side. There are abysses in Burne-Jones which Watts could not understand—the Celtic madness, older than any sanity, the hunger that will remain after the longest feast, the sorrow that is built up of stratified delights. From the point of view of the true Celt, Watts, the Watts who painted the great stoical pictures *Love and Death*, *Time, Death, and Judgment*, *The Court of Death*, *Mammon*, and *Cain*, this pictorial Watts would probably be, must almost certainly be, simply a sad, sane, strong, stupid Englishman. He may or may not be

Welsh by extraction or by part of his extraction, but in spirit he is an Englishman, with all the faults and all the disadvantages of an Englishman. He is a great Englishman like Milton or Gladstone, of the type, that is to say, that were too much alive for anything but gravity, and who enjoyed themselves far too much to trouble to enjoy a joke. Matthew Arnold has come near to defining that kind of idealism, so utterly different from the Celtic kind, which is to be found in Milton and again in Watts. He has called it, in one of his finest and most accurate phrases, 'the imaginative reason.' "

No better example than this could be found of the co-relation between the spirit and the form of an artist. But there are several passages in both the "Browning" and the "Dickens" where the same thing is done incomparably well. Let every one turn to the analysis of Browning's taste for the grotesque, and say whether among

all the multitudinous commentators on the most discussed of modern poets the truth has ever been put so forcibly or with such unerring insight before.

I think the "Dickens" a better book than the "Browning"; certainly it is a more perfect book. The principal literary fault of the "Browning" was a certain carelessness of perspective. The character of Mrs. Browning's father, for example, is examined with a minuteness of detail which is quite out of proportion to the importance of that gentleman in the poet's life. Again, as we have seen, any little incident which happened to Browning, and which appeals to Mr. Chesterton's imagination, is enough to set him off on a side issue and lead him to devote to it pages which might well have been given to matter more germane to the subject. In "Dickens" these defects either disappear or are greatly diminished. The proportions of the book are natural and harmonious. The digressions have nearly always some relation to the essentials ;

they are not introduced, as they often were in the former book, merely for their own sake. Nor has this advance in technical method been purchased by any sacrifice of the old originality or the old exuberant vigour.

“Dickens” is, I think, Mr. Chesterton’s masterpiece in criticism, because Dickens is the author whose way of looking at life was most like his own. Dickens had the same pugnacity, the same sense of the extravagant possibilities of life, the same incurable romanticism. Mr. Chesterton can therefore get thoroughly inside Dickens, and some of his appreciations have the note of that finest critical genius—the genius that tells us about an author not what we did not know before, but what we always knew but could never say. I do not know a better example of this than the passage in which he describes the eternal quality of the great Dickens characters :

“Dickens was a mythologist rather than a novelist ; he was the last of the mytholo-

gists, and perhaps the greatest. He did not always manage to make his characters men, but he always managed, at the least, to make them gods. They are creatures like Punch or Father Christmas. They live statically, in a perpetual summer of being themselves. It was not the aim of Dickens to show the effect of time and circumstance upon a character; it was not even his aim to show the effect of character on time and circumstance. It is worth remark, in passing, that whenever he tried to describe change in a character, he made a mess of it, as in the repentance of Dombey or the apparent deterioration of Boffin. (It was his aim to show character hung in a kind of happy void, in a world apart from time—yes, and essentially apart from circumstance, though the phrase may seem odd in connection with the godlike horseplay of ‘Pickwick.’ But all the Pickwickian events, wild as they often are, were only designed to display the greater wildness

of souls, or sometimes merely to bring the reader within touch, so to speak, of that wildness. The author would have fired Mr. Pickwick out of a cannon to get him to Wardle's by Christmas; he would have taken the roof off to drop him into Bob Sawyer's party. But once put Pickwick at Wardle's, with his punch and a group of gorgeous personalities, and nothing will move him from his chair. Once he is at Sawyer's party, he forgets how he got there; he forgets Mrs. Bardell and all his story. For the story was but an incantation to call up a god, and the god (Mr. Jack Hopkins) is present in divine power. Once the great characters are face to face, the ladder by which they climbed is forgotten and falls down, the structure of the story drops to pieces, the plot is abandoned, the other characters deserted at every kind of crisis; the whole crowded thoroughfare of the tale is blocked by two or three talkers, who take their

immortal ease as if they were already in Paradise. For they do not exist for the story; the story exists for them, and they † know it."

† It is impossible to deny to anyone who could write this passage the possession of critical power of the highest type. Yet that power is not without its limitations, and the worst limitation is this, ~~that~~ his passion for generalization is liable to seduce him from the true work of criticism and to lead him not only into irrelevance, but sometimes into flat nonsense. If a generalization can be expressed with some epigrammatic force, and is in harmony with his own broad philosophy of life, he seems sometimes to care nothing at all whether it is consistent with his own argument or with the facts as he himself has stated them.

I will take a curious and striking instance from the "Browning." Discussing Mr. Santayana's description of Browning as a poet of barbarism, he says :

“Thus Mr. Santayana is, perhaps, the most valuable of all the Browning critics. He has gone out of his way to endeavour to realize what it is that repels him in Browning, and he has discovered the fault which none of Browning’s opponents have discovered. And in this he has discovered the merit which none of Browning’s admirers have discovered. Whether the quality be a good or a bad quality, Mr. Santayana is perfectly right. The whole of Browning’s poetry does rest upon primitive feeling ; *and the only comment to be added is that so does the whole of every one else’s poetry.*”

Now, it must surely be obvious to every one—it would have been obvious to Mr. Chesterton if he had stopped to think about it—that the clause which I have italicized makes nonsense of his own argument. If there was a specific quality in Browning which repelled Mr. Santayana, it must have been a quality peculiar to Browning. To

say that Mr. Santayana was repelled by Browning (in contradistinction to other poets) on account of a quality which Browning shared with all other poets is palpably absurd. Moreover, if the quality in question was not specially Browningesque, but only generally poetical, where does the extraordinary merit of Mr. Santayana's "discovery" come in? Why is he "the most valuable of all the Browning critics"? It is quite obvious that Mr. Chesterton, when he began to discuss Mr. Santayana's criticism, *did* intend to maintain that the quality complained of was specially characteristic of Browning. But seeing a chance of scoring effectively off Mr. Santayana, and at the same time of propounding a theory of poetry in general harmony with his own critical leanings, he ruthlessly sacrificed an interesting critical thesis to a casual epigram.

That is an example of Mr. Chesterton's occasional indifference to the inconsistency of his generalizations with his previous argument. I will now take a case of his indifference to their

inconsistency with facts. In the course of his book on Dickens he had maintained the thesis that Dickens' humane sense of fun made it impossible for him to feel any very vindictive anger towards his great comic characters even when they were great villains—that, for instance, he loved rather than hated Pecksniff. This appears to me to be generally true. But in the introduction to "Martin Chuzzlewit" (one of a series of very brilliant introductions to the individual novels which he undertook immediately afterwards) he makes on the subject of Dickens' humane mirth a much more startling statement. "This," he says, "may be broadly said and yet with confidence, that Dickens is always at his best when he is laughing at the people whom he really admires." He goes on to give instances—Pickwick and Sam Weller, Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness. Doubtless many other instances could be given of sympathetic characters who are incomparably entertaining. But what a formidable list could be made on the other side.

Stiggins, Bumble, Mantilini, Squeers, Quilp, the Brasses, Pecksniff, Mrs. Gamp, Elijah Pogram and his circle, Major Bagstock, Mrs. Skewton, Skimpole, Chadband, Guppy, Turveydrop, Podsnap, Fascination Fledgeby, Silas Wegg. All these and many more that could be named, considered as we consider our neighbours, are either contemptible or vile, yet all are painted in undying colours, and all are full of an eternal laughter. If I were asked to quote the funniest thing in Dickens (an impossible choice, I admit), I think I should choose the speech of Mr. Chadband referring to his requiring "corn and wine and oil." And this is precisely the place where Chadband's wickedness is at its blackest.

The fact is that evidence never matters much to Mr. Chesterton. He has abundant imagination, sympathy, and insight, and he can reason clearly and correctly in the abstract; indeed, he is one of the most effective controversialists of the day. But of the temper which we call scientific, the power of deducting general principles from

a vast mass of facts, he shows little at any time, and none at all when his judgment is warped by a general theory.

One thing must be said, in conclusion, about Mr. Chesterton's critical exploit. He is often a good critic, but he is never a critic for criticism's sake. At heart he is always a pamphleteer, a crusader, almost a swashbuckler. That characteristic which I have already noticed more than once, the tendency to write with his eye on an opponent, is as noticeable in his critical works as elsewhere. / Watts is studied worthily as a great painter, but he is also studied because his sense of the seriousness and responsibility of art is a foil to the æsthetic frivolity of the modern world. Browning is praised with discrimination as a great poet, but he is also praised because his robust optimism is a challenge to the doubt and despair of the modern world. Dickens is honoured triumphantly as an incomparable humorist and draughtsman of character, but he is also honoured because his fierce, almost rowdy Radicalism is an

offence to the oligarchic decencies of the modern world. These dead men are led out as the dead Cid was led out to rout the Saracens. And at the bridle rein of each rides G. K. C. with drawn sword ready for battle.

CHAPTER IV

THE DRIFT TOWARDS ORTHODOXY

I MUST turn aside for a moment at this point to consider the change which was gradually coming over Mr. Chesterton's opinions, a change which grew more marked year by year till it culminated in the controversy with Mr. Blatchford, when for the first time, I think, he publicly avowed his belief in the central doctrines of orthodox Christianity.

Anyone comparing "The Defendant" with "The Wild Knight" will be struck by a very marked difference, and it is none the less real because so far it is a difference of attitude rather than a cognate difference of doctrine. I do not know of any specific opinion expressed in the poems which is recanted in the essays. But, all the same, the spiritual atmosphere is changed.

I think I can best express my sense of the change something in this fashion. I have already pointed out that it is one of the characteristic notes of G. K. C. that he writes with his eye always on a real or hypothetical opponent. Now, in "The Wild Knight" the foes against whom the attack is directed are principally the orthodox, the contented supporters of the established order in Church and State. In "The Defendant" it is the heretics, the revolutionaries, the impugnors of existing things who are primarily assailed.

└ The fundamental sanctities recognized are much the same in both cases, but in the poems they are preached to a conventional world which has forgotten them; in the essays they are defended against an unconventional world which is bent on destroying them. The "Kings" and "Priests" who receive so formidable a castigation in "The Wild Knight," escape without censure in "The Defendant." It is the anarchists, the atheists, the people who want to abolish marriage, the people who deny the validity

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 97

of patriotism, against whom the defences are set up.

At the same time there is abundant evidence that his feelings were softening towards the old faiths. At the time when he was writing the "Defences" he wrote an article for "The Speaker," defending the Ritualists. The attitude he took up was that of a fairminded outsider, indifferent to doctrinal differences, but disliking persecution by whomsoever practised. Nevertheless there may be noted in that essay a more sympathetic tone towards Catholicism, which is absent from his earlier utterances. In "Twelve Types" he goes further, and in the essay on "Francis of Assisi" enters upon something like a defence of Monasticism, an institution upon which he would certainly have poured scorn and indignation in his "Wild Knight" period.

Before I endeavour to trace the further progress of the change it may be well to suggest some of the causes which, even while he was writing

the "Defences" for "The Speaker," were tending to accelerate it.

In June, 1900, Mr. Chesterton married Miss Frances Blogg. She was a lady of a type of which a generation of "advanced" culture is producing a plentiful crop—the conservative rebel against the conventions of the unconventional. Living amidst the æsthetic anarchism of Bedford Park, she was in a state of seething revolt against it. Her husband was not at all the man to discourage such a revolt, and her influence on him (which has been considerable) was, one may guess, all on the side of his growing orthodoxy.

The other personal influence which made itself felt in his life about this time, and told in the same direction, was his friendship with Mr. Hilaire Belloc. Mr. Belloc would require a whole book to himself if he were to be properly described, and I do not propose to attempt such a task in this place. But to omit all mention of him would be to omit one of the most potent

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 99

influences in the development of the writer whom we are considering. The two men had not only a temperamental affinity, but from the first many points of intellectual sympathy, notably the fact that they were of the few who disliked the war without disliking war. But there was this difference, that while Mr. Chesterton's views were still in process of formation, those of Mr. Belloc had already, so to speak, solidified and solidified round the iron framework of Catholic dogma. In his own phrase, "they formed a system and were final." Now, it may be taken as an almost invariable rule that if two persons are closely associated, and one of them has unsettled opinions while the opinions of the other are fixed, the former will gravitate towards the philosophy of the latter as a meteor gravitates towards a planet. So, under the probably unconscious influence of Mr. Belloc, Mr. Chesterton was drawn towards the Catholic Faith.

But there were other than personal influences tending to sway him. I have already dwelt upon

the importance of the South African War and the controversies to which it gave rise in determining the bent of his mind. Now, there was this peculiarity about the war disputes, that both sides appealed to the same ideals—marched, so to speak, under the same banner. It was not defended, as the great French War, for instance, was defended, as a war for the preservation of authority and tradition. On the contrary, it was defended as a democratic war, a war for the purpose of breaking a narrow, corrupt, and old-fashioned oligarchy which obstructed the progress of the world. Nor could it be denied that there was at least this measure of truth in the claim—that the Boers unmistakably represented the old order, and the Outlanders the new. The Rhodesian party in South Africa called itself “Progressive,” and it was perfectly justified in doing so, if a progressive be taken to mean a man who goes the way the world appears to be going. It is not altogether surprising if Mr. Chesterton, who hated the whole spirit and

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 101

ideal of that party, felt that the way the world appeared to be going was the way to Hell!

This conviction brought him into sharp conflict with one of those vast dogmas which the nineteenth century had assumed without ever proving or even distinctly formulating—the dogma of Progress. All the great writers of that century are full of the idea of Progress—the idea that the world is inevitably getting better and better. Men of opinion and temperaments as diverse as Shelley and Macaulay accepted it without question. It received an additional impetus from the current misinterpretations of Darwin's doctrine of Evolution; that biological speculation, which in its inventor's mind involved nothing more than a hypothesis concerning the causes which led organisms to approximate to their environment, was interpreted by poets and rhetoricians as a promise of the ultimate triumph of good over evil—"good" and "evil" being just the two words that no true man of

science ever uses. Thus Tennyson held that man would

Move upwards, working out the brute,
And let the ape and tiger die.

until, in the slow processes of time, all mankind became gradually more and more like the Prince Consort! In a word, Progressive Evolutionism became a new religion. It is as a conspicuous rebel against the dogmas of this religion that Mr. Chesterton is most notable in his generation.

Of course, he did not achieve his emancipation from a doctrine so inextricably bound up with all the traditions of his youth without hesitation and doubt. In "The Wild Knight" you will find the idea of Progress everywhere. In "The Defendant" and in the articles written for "The Speaker" about the same time it is less prominent—indeed, opinions are advanced fundamentally inconsistent with it; but its truth is still tacitly assumed. The first tentative challenge, so far as I can discover, will be found in the

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 103

Lesson on "Carlyle" included in "Twelve Types," where he says :

'He denied the theory of progress which assumed that we must be better off than the people of the Twelfth Century. Whether we were better than the people of the Twelfth Century according to him depended entirely on whether we chose or deserved to be.'

But here he leaves himself a loop-hole for escape. He is summarizing Carlyle's doctrine, not avowedly formulating his own, and he leaves his reader free to suppose that this is one of the opinions of which he speaks in the context where he says that "even where his view was not the highest truth, it was always a refreshing and beneficent heresy." In the controversy with Mr. Blatchford, on the other hand, he expresses similar views *in propria persona*. In "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" the denial of Progress becomes almost the main thesis of the book. In

“Heretics” it is assumed as confidently as the assertion of Progress was assumed by the great Victorian Liberals.

Closely related to this change was another—the complete transformation of his views in regard to the existence of positive evil. The cause of G. K. C.’s return to a dogmatic faith was not, as has been the case with others, his discovery of the need for a personal God. In that he had always believed; it is assumed in “The Wild Knight” as unhesitatingly as in “Heretics.” His epoch-making discovery was his discovery of the need for a personal Devil.

Now, it was of the essence of the new Evolutionary Religion in all its varying forms that it denied the Devil, even where it confessed God. Mr. Campbell, the typical exponent of what I may call Christian Evolutionism, describes evil as a thing merely negative—“a shadow where light should be.” Mr. Chesterton himself held the same view, a view obviously incompatible with the belief in any Devil worthy of the name,

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 105

at the time when he wrote "The Wild Knight," as the quotations given in a previous chapter pretty clearly prove. He continued to hold it, though with some signs of doubt and reservation, at the time when he was writing his literary articles for "The Speaker," for in a review of "Mark Rutherford" we find him distinguishing between a belief in the Devil and a belief in Devils, doubting whether "there is an abyss of evil as deep as the tower of holiness is high," and expressing a hope for the final salvation of all souls. But evidently his hold on the confident optimism of his childhood is slipping.

I have called this current modern philosophy "Evolutionary Religion," but the phrase is liable to misinterpretation. There is not, of course, the slightest foundation for its dogmas in the facts of physical science or in the scientific speculations of Darwin and his followers. The men who really understood those speculations saw this clearly. No one insisted on the positive existence of evil more emphatically than Huxley; no man

had less belief in the ultimate certainty of human perfection. Indeed, Huxley avowed on more than one occasion his conviction that the old theological systems, with their stern and pitiless judgments, and their hell-fire for wrong-thinkers as well as for wrongdoers, corresponded more closely with the facts of the universe as revealed by science than the amiable visions of the Broad Churchmen. But the truth is that the progenitors of the New Theology owed little to the doctrine of Evolution save few inspiring words and a false analogy, which might seem to justify to the unscientific multitude the optimistic humanitarian fatalism which they believed on altogether different, and for the most part subjective, grounds.

For that doctrine there was undoubtedly much to be said. Considered intellectually as a theory of the universe addressed to the human reason, it must seem to many hopelessly inadequate. But considered morally as a revolt of the human heart against what Mr. Chesterton has since called

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 107

“ that unique dispensation which theologians call Calvinism and Christians Devil-worship,” it is wholly to be admired. It was humane, idealistic, generous, lofty in its thoughts of God and Man. There is only one thing to be said against it ; it will not fit the facts.

In order to get over the obvious difficulties presented by the existence of unmistakable evil, the New Theologians once more called pseudo-science to their aid. For the Devil they substituted “ the Brute,” which, according to Tennyson, was to be “ worked out ” as Man moved upwards. The evil in human nature was merely the fading trace of its animal origin, which would disappear altogether as the race approached its ultimate perfection.

But during the contests which raged round the South African problem Mr. Chesterton had seen evil face to face, and he felt it to be emphatically *not* the “ shadow where light should be ” of Mr. Campbell, but rather the “ darkness visible ” of Milton. He had seen the dark features of the

Asiatic adventurers who had, as he believed, plotted a gigantic crime and set two simpler and braver peoples to kill each other for their profit, and they seemed to him the foul faces of Devils. Could the existence of these men be explained by saying that they were "undeveloped," that the animal was still too strong in them? Surely it was obvious that they were very much further removed from mere animals than the decent British soldiers, the decent Boer farmers, whom they were sending to the slaughter. They were no relics of barbarism; they were the very latest product of an elaborate civilization. The Enemy of Man was not, it seemed, the Brute, a thing ruder and more senseless than Man, but a thing infinitely subtler than Man—in a word, the Devil.

To a combination of these causes may be traced, I think, the growing orthodoxy of Mr. Chesterton's religious convictions. But just as the sharp contests concerning South Africa had forced him to define his political doctrines to

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 109

himself, so it was a sudden outbreak of theological controversy which forced him to define for himself and for others the position at which he had arrived in religious matters. The immediate cause of this outbreak was the sudden attack made on the Christian religion by Mr. Robert Blatchford, the Editor of the "Clarion." ✓

Mr. Blatchford was a consummate master of all the weapons of popular controversy. He could put his case, whatever it might be, forcibly, yet in language so simple that the most ignorant workman could understand it. He had also at his command a certain strong colloquial eloquence and could make his plain English ring suddenly like a sword on an anvil. His Socialist tracts and pamphlets were incomparably the best work of their kind that had been done, and have contributed incalculably to the spread of Socialism in this country. He was undoubtedly less well qualified for philosophical than for economic discussion. He did not know his facts so well. He sometimes displayed a quite startling absence of

familiarity with older controversies on the subject, as when he seemed to claim that the obvious argument against Free Will that it is inconsistent with the omnipotence of God was his own discovery. His science was rather crude, and there were undoubtedly plenty of weak points which a skilful adversary might find in his case. But a skilful adversary was not so easy to find.

Indeed, the response to Mr. Blatchford did little credit to the intellectual equipment of modern Christianity. Half its defenders called Mr. Blatchford a blasphemer; the other half, with much greater impertinence, called him a Christian. On the question in regard to which Mr. Blatchford was somewhat at sea they showed themselves more at sea, while their replies lacked altogether the lucidity and boldness in which Mr. Blatchford never failed. Their controversial strategy was infantile. They gave up without a struggle strong positions which could easily have been defended. They put forward weak hypotheses, invented by themselves, and then defended

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 111

them as if they were of the essence of Christianity. Of all those who took a prominent part on the Christian side only two put up an effective fight—the Rev. Charles Marson and G. K. Chesterton.

The principal interest for us of the “Clarion” controversy lies in the fact that it led Mr. Chesterton to make his first public declaration of faith in the orthodox system of Christian dogma. Mr. Blatchford had put a series of questions to his Christian antagonists. Here they are, together with Mr. Chesterton’s answers :

“(1) Are you a Christian ?—Certainly.

“(2) What do you mean by the word Christianity ?—The belief that a certain human being whom we call Christ stood to a certain superhuman Being whom we call God in a certain unique transcendental relation which we call sonship.

“(3) What do you believe ?—A considerable number of things. That Mr. Blatchford is an honest man, for insta

and (though less firmly) that there is a place called Japan. If he means, what do I believe in religious matters, I believe the above statement (answer No. 2) and a large number of other mystical dogmas ranging from the mystical dogma that man is the image of God to the mystical dogma that all men are equal, and that babies should not be strangled.

“(4) Why do you believe it?—Because I perceive life to be logical and workable with these beliefs, and illogical and unworkable without them.”

These answers are explicit enough, and the fourth is particularly interesting because it supplies the clue to the kind of defence he afterwards set up.

That defence was wholly pragmatic. He makes no adequate attempt to show that the Christian creed is an intellectually coherent and reasonable explanation of the Universe. He almost admits

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 113

that it is not so. But he contends that it is a philosophy by which men can live, and that more logical philosophies smash themselves against elemental human necessities.

“Some Determinists fancy that Christianity invented a dogma like free will for fun—a mere contradiction. This is absurd. You have the contradiction, whatever you are. Determinists tell me, with a degree of truth, that Determinism makes no difference to daily life. That means that although the Determinist knows men have no free will, yet he goes on treating them as if they had.

“The difference, then, is very simple. The Christian puts the contradiction into his philosophy. The Determinist puts it into his daily habits. The Christian states as an avowed mystery what the Determinist calls nonsense. The Determinist has the same nonsense for breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper every day of his life.

“ The Christian, I repeat, puts the mystery into his philosophy. That mystery by its darkness enlightens all things. Once grant him that, and life is life, and bread is bread, and cheese is cheese ; he can laugh and fight. The Determinist makes the matter of the will logical and lucid ; and in the light of that lucidity all things are darkened, words have no meaning, actions no aim. He has made his philosophy a syllogism and himself a gibbering lunatic.

“ It is not a question between mysticism and rationality. It is a question between mysticism and madness. For mysticism, and ✱ mysticism alone, has kept men sane from the beginning of the world. All the straight roads of logic lead to some Bedlam, to Anarchism or to passive obedience, to treating the universe as a clockwork of matter or else as a delusion of mind. It is only the Mystic, the man who accepts the contradictions, who can laugh and walk easily through the world.

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 115

“ Are you surprised that the same civilization which believed in the Trinity discovered steam ? ”

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The proof of the truth of Christianity lies, according to Mr. Chesterton, in the comparative practical success of the Christian civilization.

“ Christianity, which is a very mystical religion, has nevertheless been the religion of the most practical section of mankind. It has far more paradoxes than the Eastern philosophies, but it also builds far better roads.

“ The Moslem has a pure and logical conception of God, the one Monistic Allah. But he remains a barbarian in Europe, and the grass will not grow where he sets his foot. The Christian has a Triune God, ‘ a tangled trinity,’ which seems a mere capricious contradiction in terms. But in action he bestrides the earth, and even the cleverest

Eastern can only fight him by imitating him first. The East has logic and lives on rice. Christendom has mysteries—and motor-cars.”

When Mr. Chesterton comes to the explicit defence of Christian doctrines he pursues the same line of argument. Man must have some philosophy to live by. “We are all Agnostics until we discover that Agnosticism will not work.” “It is all very well to tell a man, as the Agnostics do, to cultivate his garden. But suppose a man ignores everything outside his garden, and among them ignores the sun and the rain?” “Man cannot live by a philosophy which denies the existence of anything good behind the Universe. Such a philosophy leads to pessimism and despair. As little can he live by a philosophy which recognizes the visible Universe itself as divinity and exemplar—by Pantheism or Nature Worship. Such a philosophy leads to Anarchism and crime. “The one leads logically to murder and the other to suicide.” But “then comes a fantastic thing

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 117

and says to us : ' You are right to enjoy the birds, but wicked to copy them. There is a good thing behind all these things, yet all these things are lower than you. The Universe is right, but the world is wicked. The thing behind all is not cruel, like a bird ; but good, like a man.' And the wholesome thing in us says : ' I have found the high road.' . . . After an agony of thought the world saw the sane path. . . . It was the Christian God. He made Nature, but He was Man."

In similar fashion he deals with Mr. Blatchford's Determinism. Mr. Blatchford had made the doctrine of Free Will the main object of his attack, had maintained that, if there were a God who created Man, he must be held responsible for all Man's acts, and that, if supernatural powers were left out of account, Man must be held to be the creature of heredity and environment. Mr. Chesterton again replied by an appeal to human necessity. Everybody, including Determinists, did, as a matter of fact, act on the

assumption that Man possessed Free Will. There might be a contradiction in that doctrine, but it was a contradiction in the nature of things. The choice was between introducing the contradiction into your philosophy and introducing it into your practice.

Unfortunately for his own case, Mr. Blatchford played his opponent's game by persistently mixing up his Determinism with a theory about the uselessness of punishment, with which it had really nothing to do. The ablest exponents of a fatalistic philosophy have constantly pointed out that a Determinist can quite logically punish. It may be true that the burglar whom Society sends to prison is what he is in consequence of his heredity and environment. But the fact that burglars are sent to prison is part of the burglar's environment, and may perfectly well modify his actions. To say that threatening the criminal with punishment cannot change his conduct because that conduct is governed by the laws of human nature is as absurd as it would be to say that a brake

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 119

cannot check the speed of a train because that speed is regulated by the laws of motion. Mr. Blatchford, however, thought well to reinforce his logical argument by an appeal to the world's sentimental compassion for offenders, and by so doing gave G. K. C. his chance.

How he used it the following typical example will show. Mr. Blatchford had explained that if he found a small boy hitting his sister he would not punish the boy, but would make an appeal to him in these words :

“ My dear lad, *you mustn't hit a girl*. It is cowardly. *Men don't hit women*. And you must not allow yourself to get into a passion. If you do, your temper will master you. Come, laddie, be a *gentleman*. Who will love Sis if *you* don't ? What if she *did* tease you ? Let her. She likes it, bless her. And you are not a *baby*. Pooh ! don't be a muff. Go and put your cap on, and we'll have a game of cricket.”

The opening was too good a one for Mr. Chesterton to lose. He replied, with considerable humour and really unanswerable logic :

“ You say you would talk like this to the little boy. I hope you will forgive me if I say that I think you are wise to choose a little boy : I should recommend a very little boy. But do not talk like that to anyone who has read your philosophical works. If the little boy, instead of confining himself to adventure stories (which may be called the literature of Free Will), were to equip himself largely, from back numbers of the ‘Clarion,’ with your philosophy and phraseology, he would, I think, open his infant lips and deliver a crushing reply as follows :

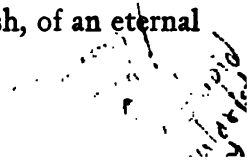
“ ‘ What meaning am I to attach, my dear father, to your extraordinary statement that I must not hit Zenobia ? That I have already done it proves that I must have done

Drift Towards Orthodoxy 121

it. That blow was the inevitable outcome of heredity and environment. My rather ferocious heredity (derived possibly from yourself) the environment (otherwise Zenobia) produced a result like a result in chemistry. You say it is cowardly. I assure you, with scientific calm, that I was born cowardly. As for your assertion that 'Men don't hit women,' my very slight knowledge of life enables me to meet it with a direct negative. Men do. I am Agnostic upon the question you raise of who is to love Sis if I don't. But I am quite clear that somebody or nobody must do it if I can't. Barring the expression, "Bless her"—which, as probably an abbreviation of "God bless her," I cannot but regard as a relic of barbarism—I am quite ready to allow you to love the young woman if you can. It is a trick of your inherent temperament to love Zenobia. It is a trick of mine to hit her. Are you answered? "

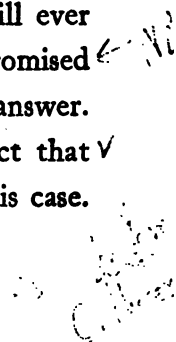
Given 1881

The weak point in Mr. Chesterton's defence of Christianity was left almost unnoticed throughout the controversy. That weak point was that he made no real attempt to defend the Christian philosophy at all. He defended the doctrine of Free Will; but the doctrine of Free Will is in practice assumed by all ordinary men. He defended the doctrine of Original Sin; but the doctrine of Original Sin is self-evident to any man with eyes in his head. Of the more mystical and questionable Christian dogmas he says little or nothing. He leaves it open for an independent Freethinker to reply: "Granted that you have scored off Mr. Blatchford; granted that you have shown his system to be untenable and unworkable—what is that to me? I am not committed to that system. Let us assume, if you will, that Man appears to have in him a power of choice; let us assume that in human nature there is an element of permanent weakness and evil. Now prove your strange story of a Heavenly Father, of a God incarnate in Flesh, of an eternal



Drift Towards Orthodoxy 123

life beyond the grave—prove that incredible story to be true.” Mr. Chesterton has never so far answered that challenge. Whether he will ever answer it I do not know. Possibly his promised book on “Orthodoxy” will prove the answer. Until it appears we must register the fact that ✓
Mr. Chesterton has only made out half his case.



CHAPTER V

THE ASSAULT ON THE MODERNS

104 7 **BY** the time the "Clarion" discussion was over Mr. Chesterton's mental transformation was complete. His old confidence in the destiny of the modern world (of which his early poems and essays are full) had given place to a rooted repugnance and antagonism. He hated it in all its aspects, even in those aspects of which the most conservative thinkers have generally spoken with respect. For, whatever his faults, timidity and irresolution were never among them. Having initiated the campaign, he joined battle all along the line.

One example will illustrate the change. Nothing in our civilization has seemed to most people more unmistakably creditable than our advance in physical science. Of that advance G. K. C.

Assault on the Moderns 125

had in his earlier days spoken with respect—even with enthusiasm. In a poem called “King’s Cross Station” in “The Wild Knight,” he speaks of—

The vision of Man, shouting and erect,
Whirled by the raging steeds of flood and fire.

But in his later books the words “science” and “scientists” are used only as terms of flippant abuse. “The people has no disbelief in the temples of theology. The people has a very fiery and practical disbelief in the temples of physical science.” “Both realists and dynamiters are well-meaning people engaged in the task, so obviously ultimately hopeless, of using science to promote morality.”

“Heretics,” the controversial book which followed close on the “Clarion” episode, is an outspoken attack on Modernity. The form it takes is a series of essays in criticism of typical modern writers. But it would be unjust to judge it, as I have judged the “Browning” and the “Dickens,” by canons of literary criticism. The

intention of literary criticism is disclaimed from the start :

“ I wish to deal with my most distinguished contemporaries, not personally or in a merely literary manner, but in relation to the real body of doctrine which they teach. I am not concerned with Mr. Rudyard Kipling as a vivid artist or a vigorous personality : I am concerned with him as a heretic—that is to say, a man whose view of things has the hardihood to differ from mine. I am not concerned with Mr. Bernard Shaw as one of the most brilliant and one of the most honest men alive : I am concerned with him as a heretic—that is to say, a man whose philosophy is quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong.”

The justification of the book in its author's eyes is that it calls attention to the neglected truth of “ the importance of Orthodoxy ”—that is to say, the importance of having a right view

Assault on the Moderns 127

of the meaning of the Universe. In the modern world men seem to think the Universe the one entirely unimportant subject. "A man's opinion on tramcars matters: his opinion on Boticelli matters. . . . Everything matters—except everything." Men of our day refuse altogether to believe that doctrines will influence conduct. They never think that the man who says in a drawing-room that life is not worth living will really treat life as an evil, will reward murderers for saving men from life, or root out the Royal Humane Society like a horde of assassins. We are convinced that theories do not matter.

Hence: "Never has there been so little discussion about the nature of men as now, when, for the first time, anyone can discuss it. The old restrictions meant that only the orthodox were allowed to discuss religion. Modern liberty means that nobody is allowed to discuss it. . . . Emancipation has only locked the saint in the same tower of silence as the heresiarch. Then we talk about Lord Anglesey and the weather,

and call it the complete liberty of all the creeds."

Against this tendency Mr. Chesterton planks down his own proposition that "the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the Universe": and that "the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run anything else affects them."

It appears to me that this proposition is by far the most important in the book. The criticisms directed against individual writers may be sound or unsound, but there can surely be no doubt that we moderns have grossly underrated the practical importance of men's philosophy. How many of our mistakes in Ireland might have been avoided if we had once realized that the most important thing about the Irish is that they are Catholics. Thanks to our neglect of that fact our hands have continually been forced by Orangemen, because the Orangemen, at any rate, understood it and paid to Catholicism at least the

Assault on the Moderns 129

tribute of hatred. All this is summed up by Mr. Chesterton in an admirable parable with which the introductory essay ends :

“ Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamp-post, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen, ‘ Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If light be in itself good——’ At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmediæval practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some people have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light : some because they wanted old iron :

some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it was not enough of a lamp-post, some too much : some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery : some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, to-day, to-morrow, or the next day, there comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark."

The aim of "Heretics," then, is to show that the philosophy current in the modern world and professed by its leading writers is a bad philosophy, and that to the reactions of this bad philosophy may be traced the worst of the evils with which we are confronted.

Such an aim at once absolves the author from

Assault on the Moderns 131

any condemnation which might be passed on the essays for their inadequacy as criticisms. What we have to ask is, first~~y~~, whether Mr. Chesterton has rightly apprehended and fairly summed up the body of doctrine taught by the various writers with whom he deals; and, second~~y~~, whether his criticisms of their body of doctrine are valid.

In regard to the first question, the verdict must, in most cases, I think, be in Mr. Chesterton's favour. Nothing, for instance, could be truer and fairer than his statement of the message of Mr. Rudyard Kipling—the writer to whom, above all others, he seems most hostile :

“And unconsciously Mr. Kipling has proved this, and proved it admirably. For in so far as his work is earnestly understood, the military trade does not by any means emerge as the most important or attractive. He has not written so well about soldiers as he has about railway men or bridge builders,

or even journalists. The fact is that what attracts Mr. Kipling to militarism is not the idea of courage, but the idea of discipline. There was far more courage to the square mile in the Middle Ages, when no king had a standing army, but every man had a bow or sword. But the fascination of the standing army upon Mr. Kipling is not courage, which scarcely interests him, but discipline, which is, when all is said and done, his primary theme. The modern army is not a miracle of courage: it has not enough opportunities, owing to the cowardice of everybody else. But it is really a miracle of organization, and that is the truly Kiplingite ideal. Kipling's subject is not that valour which properly belongs to war, but that interdependence and efficiency which belongs quite as much to engineers, or sailors, or mules, or railway engines. And thus it is that when he writes of engineers, or sailors, or mules, or steam-engines, he writes at his

Assault on the Moderns 133

best. The real poetry, the 'true romance' which Mr. Kipling has taught, is the romance of the division of labour and the discipline of all the trades. He sings the arts of peace much more accurately than the arts of war. And his main contention is vital and valuable. Everything is military in the sense that everything depends upon obedience. There is no perfectly epicurean corner: there is no perfectly irresponsible place. Everywhere men have made the way for us with sweat and submission. We may fling ourselves into a hammock in a fit of divine carelessness. But we are glad that the net-maker did not make the hammock in a fit of divine carelessness. We may jump upon a child's rocking-horse for a joke. But we are glad that the carpenter did not leave the legs of it unglued for a joke. So far from having merely preached that a soldier cleaning his side-arm is to be adored because he is military, Kipling at his best and clearest

has preached that the baker baking loaves and the tailor cutting coats are as military as anybody."

Mr. Bernard Shaw, again, receives full and fair recognition for his great intellectual virtue :

"The whole force and triumph of Mr. Bernard Shaw lie in the fact that he is a thoroughly consistent man. So far from his power consisting in jumping through hoops or standing on his head, his power consists in holding his own fortress night and day. He puts the Shaw test rapidly and rigorously to everything that happens in heaven or earth. His standard never varies. The thing which weak-minded revolutionists and weak-minded Conservatives really hate (and fear) in him is exactly this, that his scales, such as they are, are held even, and that his law, such as it is, is justly enforced. You may attack his principles, as I do : but I do not know of any instance in which you can

Assault on the Moderns 135

attack their application. If he dislikes lawlessness, he dislikes the lawlessness of Socialists as much as that of Individualists. If he dislikes the fever of patriotism, he dislikes it in Boers and Irishmen as well as in Englishmen. If he dislikes the vows and bonds of marriage, he dislikes still more the fiercer bonds and wilder vows that are made by lawless love. If he laughs at the authority of priests, he laughs louder at the pomposity of men of science. If he condemns the irresponsibility of faith, he condemns with a sane consistency the equal irresponsibility of art. He has pleased all the Bohemians by saying that women are equal to men : but he has infuriated them by suggesting that men are equal to women. He is almost mechanically just : he has something of the terrible quality of a machine."

T These two passages prove pretty conclusively that Mr. Chesterton is not debarred from under-

standing other men's point of view by the mere fact that that point of view is violently antagonistic to his own. When he does fail to understand, his failure appears to arise from some wayward blast of prejudice against the man himself, which sometimes appears to warp and dwarf his intellect like the spell of a magician. One great man of the nineteenth century has suffered many things from Mr. Chesterton, owing, as it seems to me, solely to Mr. Chesterton's incurable inability (or, it may be, obstinate unwillingness) to comprehend his method and meaning. That great man is Henrik Ibsen.

At first sight one would have thought that no man would be better able to appreciate Ibsen than Mr. Chesterton. His literary method is perhaps the supreme demonstration of Mr. Chesterton's favourite theory—the compatibility of profound truth to the essential things of the soul with extravagant impossibility in externals. Those who call Ibsen a "Realist" in the ordinary sense can surely never have read "The Lady from

Assault on the Moderns 137

the Sea," or "The Master Builder," or "Little Eyolf." Can we conceive any true Realist—can we conceive Zola, for instance, or George Gissing—introducing into the middle of a tragedy of modern suburban married life a figure that seems to have stepped straight out of Grimm—a Rat Wife who lures away children and drowns them? We cannot conceive them doing such a thing. We cannot conceive any modern story-teller doing such a thing—except G. K. Chesterton. It is not easy to find in literature anything exactly of a kind with Mr. Chesterton's wild, symbolic farces of modern life—"The Napoleon of Notting Hill," "The Club of Queer Trades," "The Man who was Thursday." But, if it can be found anywhere, it will be found in the changing atmosphere and grotesque symbolism of "Peer Gynt." ✓

Nor would the ideas of Ibsen seem less likely to be acceptable to G. K. C. than his form. In his controversy with Mr. Blatchford, and on many subsequent occasions, Mr. Chesterton has emphasized continually the cardinal importance

of the doctrine of Free Will. Now, Ibsen is, above all things, the prophet of Free Will. That the brave man is the man who defies circumstance, that the strong man is the man who conquers circumstance, that the lot even of the man or woman who is beaten and broken in pieces in the fight with circumstance, like Solness, is happier and nobler than that of one who slavishly accepts circumstance, like Hedda Gabler—these are the lessons enforced again and again in every one of Ibsen's plays. Yet, Will-Worshipper as he was, Ibsen carefully guarded himself against the Self-Worship of later thinkers. The Neitszchian Superman is actually introduced by Ibsen, but he is introduced to be satyriized, humiliated, presented as a village waster and coward turned fraudulent stock-jobber and sham mystic, and finally to be crowned "Emperor of Himself" by a company of escaped lunatics who are thoroughly convinced (as all lunatics are) that they also are emperors of themselves. The real strong man of Ibsen is quite a different sort of

Assault on the Moderns 139

person. He is the man "who stands most alone"—indeed, but the man who stands alone for others. It is curious that Mr. Chesterton should not have seen a Pro-Boer analogy in Dr. Stockman's famous outburst: "I love my native town so well that I would rather ruin it than see it flourishing upon a lie." It is still more curious that he should have failed to realize the force of the Doctor's comparison of himself to "a certain person" who was "more good-natured" than he. In a fine Christmas poem which appeared in the "Commonwealth," Mr. Chesterton wrote the lines:

For we are for all men under the sun
And they are against us every one,

lines which might almost be the motto of "The Enemy of the People."

It is true that Ibsen must naturally appear to Mr. Chesterton in his later phases as too much of an optimist, as trusting the naked human will too completely, as neglecting—so G. K. C. would probably put it—the doctrine of Original Sin.

But all this applies much more strongly to Whitman, of whom Mr. Chesterton always speaks with an admiration amounting almost to devotion, than to Ibsen, of whom he never speaks without a curious note of resentment.

As to Mr. Chesterton's specific criticisms of Ibsen in the essay on "The Negative Spirit" in "Heretics," they are almost childish enough to have been written by Dr. Max Nordau. Ibsen is accused of "a negative spirit," "a vagueness and a changing attitude towards what is really wisdom and virtue," because "falsehood works ruin in 'The Pillars of Society,' but truth works equal ruin in 'The Wild Duck.'" As well might Shakespeare be accused of "vagueness and a changing attitude" because feminine influence is a destructive force in "Macbeth" and a beneficent force in "The Merchant of Venice." Dickens might be reproached in the same way because avarice works the moral ruin of Gradgrind, while profusion works the moral ruin of Harold Skimpole. In his "Dickens" Mr. Ches-

Assault on the Moderns 141

terton himself quotes this latter case, and quotes it as an example of his hero's honesty. Why should (the same thing) which in Dickens is a sign of "a kind of uncontrollable honesty" be a sign of "the negative spirit" in Ibsen?

As for the complaint that Ibsen cannot tell us "how virtue and happiness are brought about," of course he cannot! Nobody can. Mr. Chesterton would presumably say that they are brought about by the grace of God; and Ibsen, (in different phraseology, would probably have given much the same answer. It is much easier to point out that it is generally desirable to avoid rape and murder than to give people a recipe for becoming saints and heroes. But, though Ibsen could not give a prescription warranted to produce heroism, he could do something else. He could do what Shakespeare could not do, what Dickens could not do, what Thackeray could not do, what no one, save perhaps Bunyan, has done since the intellectualism of the Renaissance destroyed the heroic tradition of Europe—he could draw a hero.

And to draw a hero is to make men believe again in the heroic. And to make them believe in the heroic is to make them love it.

In a recent article Mr. Chesterton ventured the suggestion that Mr. Bernard Shaw had never read Shakespeare's "Julius Cæsar." With equal diffidence I venture the suggestion that Mr. Chesterton has never read Ibsen—never, at any rate, read him fairly and with an open-minded desire to get at his meaning. He has read Mr. Shaw's "Quintessence of Ibsenism," and has disagreed with it. He has met people who liked Ibsen and has disliked them. But Mr. Shaw's book is nothing more than the Quintessence of Shawism, and the Ibsenites have no more claim to represent Ibsen than the readers of the "Daily News" have to represent Mr. Chesterton. Mr. Chesterton, however, appears to have allowed an ineradicable association to grow in his mind between Ibsen and long-haired vegetarians, similar to the association which our ancestors formed between Frenchmen and frog-eating, and to

Assault on the Moderns 143

have based upon that association a very similar
L prejudice.

But this by the way. If we turn from the authors whom Mr. Chesterton does not understand to the authors whom he does, we may take as the four typical heretics Mr. Bernard Shaw, Mr. Kipling, Mr. H. G. Wells, and Mr. Lowes Dickinson.

Let us now turn to these writers to whom Mr. Chesterton does some reasonable justice. The essay on Mr. Kipling may be postponed until we come to deal with the critic's politics. Those on Whistler and on Mr. George Moore are rather criticisms of temperament than of doctrine. That wherein Mr. McCabe is urged to cultivate "a divine frivolity" is more an amusing piece of sparring than a serious criticism of philosophy. This leaves three essays in criticism of the critics of orthodoxy—Mr. Bernard Shaw, Mr. H. G. Wells, and Mr. Lowes Dickinson, a statement of what appears to the author the sound theory of drinking in contradistinction to that of Omar as

interpreted by Fitzgerald, and a number of miscellaneous essays, in which the influence of a wrong conception of life is traced in various developments of modern life and literature—"The Yellow Press," "Sandals and Simplicity," "Smart Novelists and the Smart Set," "Slum Novelists and the Slums," "Christmas and the *Æsthetes*."

What is the essence of Mr. Chesterton's attack on modern thought? Briefly, I think it may be summarized as follows. The scepticism of the cleverest thinkers has made men doubtful about those axioms which cannot safely be the subject of doubt, and has consequently left their minds derelict on a sea of indecision. Mr. Shaw doubts the existence of any permanent element in morality, affirming that "the Golden Rule is that there is no Golden Rule." Mr. Wells goes further, and doubts that there is any permanent element in anything—"nothing endures, nothing is precise and certain. . . . Being, indeed!—there is no being, but a universal becoming of individualities." This sort of scepticism seems to

Assault on the Moderns 145

Mr. Chesterton not only anarchic, but reactionary. It destroys all possibility of human effort, for unless our aim is clearly defined beyond possibility of question progress is unmeaning.

“North and south are relative in the sense that I am north of Bournemouth and south of Spitzbergen. But if there be any doubt of the position of the North Pole, there is in equal degree a doubt of whether I am south of Spitzbergen at all. The absolute idea of light may be practically unattainable. We may not be able to procure pure light. We may not be able to get to the North Pole. But because the North Pole is unattainable, it does not follow that it is indefinable. And it is only because the North Pole is not indefinable that we can make a satisfactory map of Brighton and Worthing.”

Since in the hands of the philosophers ideas have thus become self-destructive, the common

man abandons ideas altogether and puts his trust in phrases like "progress" and "efficiency." Now, progress implies that you are going somewhere, and efficiency that you are doing something, and unless you know where you want to go and what you want to do both words are useless and unmeaning. So at last scepticism lands most men in the worship of material success, with its consequences, the corruption and cowardice of the Press and of politics, the revival of aristocracy, the paralysis of all effort for human improvement. As Mr. Chesterton has put it in his introduction to "The Book of Job," "we give up the hard task of making good men successful in favour of the much easier task of making out successful men good."

Mr. Chesterton vehemently denies that this materialistic success-worship leads even to material success :

"The time of big theories was the time of big results. In the era of sentiment and fine

Assault on the Moderns 147

words, at the end of the eighteenth century, men were really robust and effective. The sentimentalists conquered Napoleon. The cynics could not catch De Wet. A hundred years ago our affairs for good or evil were wielded triumphantly by rhetoricians. Now our affairs are hopelessly muddled by strong, silent men."

The revolutionists Mr. Chesterton finds equally shackled by materialism. Some are trusting to "economic forces" and "the materialist conception of history." Others are trusting to science, whose "chief use is to find long words to cover the errors of the rich." Others, again, seek simplicity by living on vegetables and wearing sandals. But simplicity must be sought in the soul. "It does not very much matter whether a man eats a grilled tomato or a plain tomato; it does very much matter whether he eats a plain tomato with a grilled mind. . . . There is more simplicity in the man who eats caviare on impulse

than in the man who eats grape-nuts on principle. . . . And at those who talk to us with interfering eloquence about Jaeger and the pores of the skin, and about Plasmon and the coats of the stomach, at them shall only be hurled the words that are hurled at fops and gluttons, 'Take no thought what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, or wherewith ye shall be clothed. For after all these things do the Gentiles seek. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.' "

So we come back to the necessity for general ideals. What, then, shall be the ideal that man shall follow? Mr. Shaw's Superman is rejected. He is non-human, even anti-human. "Mr. Shaw cannot understand that the thing which is valuable and lovable in our eyes is man—the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, respectable man." Equally unsatisfactory is the more prosaic ideal of Mr. Wells, the production of "satisfactory fathers and mothers." This, like

Assault on the Moderns 149

the talk about progress, is a mere evasion of the issue. "What is the good of begetting a man until we have settled what is the good of being a man?" But perhaps the most interesting essay in the book is the reply to Mr. Lowes Dickinson, who had boldly put forward the Pagan ideal as superior to the Christian.

Mr. Chesterton's attack on Mr. Lowes Dickinson's Paganism is exceedingly clever debating. But it seems to me that his main argument proves too much, and would, if accepted, destroy the rest of the book. "There is one broad fact about the relations of Christianity and Paganism . . . that one came after the other. Mr. Lowes Dickinson . . . suggests that the Pagan ideal will be the ultimate good of man ; but, if that is so, we must ask, with more curiosity than he allows for, why it was that man actually found his ultimate good on earth under the stars and threw it away again." And so, at the conclusion of the essay, Mr. Dickinson is accused of "ignoring definite human discoveries in the moral world."

"If we do revive and pursue the pagan ideal of a simple and rational self-completion we shall end—where Paganism ended. I do not mean that we shall end in destruction. I mean that we shall end in Christianity."

Now, it is surely obvious that this line of argument is one that can be used against Mr. Chesterton himself with fully equal force. Mr. Chesterton is never tired of telling us that the modern world must be considered as definitely non-Christian. He is never tired of telling us that the Christian ideal is "the ultimate good of man." Why, then, Mr. Dickinson might reply, was it that "man actually found his ultimate good on earth under the stars and threw it away again?" If the absurd theory of uninterrupted progress be valid, then no doubt Christianity must have been an improvement on Paganism, and the Dark Ages must have been an improvement on the Roman Empire, and modern industrialism must be an improvement on feudalism, and modern Rationalism on Catholicism. But if the contrary

Assault on the Moderns 151

doctrine, which Mr. Chesterton has so continually proclaimed, be true, then there is no more inherent impossibility in the theory that the change from Paganism and Christianity was a disastrous fall, a submersion of the human spirit in error and sin, than in the theory that the break up of Christian unity and faith was such a fall.

Mr. Chesterton's position is much stronger and more consistent when he undertakes the specific defence of the Christian as against the Pagan ideal. Nothing, I think, could be truer and more vividly expressed than his defence of the Christian virtue of humility—"the psychological discovery that, whereas it had been supposed that the fullest possible enjoyment is to be found in extending our ego to infinity, the truth is that the fullest possible enjoyment is to be found by reducing our ego to zero." Nothing could be more suggestive than his contrast between the Pagan virtues of justice and temperance, which are reasonable and sad, and the Christian virtues of

Faith, Hope, and Charity, which are unreasonable and joyous.

But the same fact may be noted in regard to "Heretics," as we have already noticed in connection with the "Clarion" controversy. Mr. Chesterton criticizes his opponents with much vigour and acumen. But he does not very clearly define, much less defend, his own position. Doubtless that position can be roughly deduced from his criticisms of others, but from one who lays such stress upon the importance of clearly defined doctrines we have a right to expect something more than this negative method of definition. His forthcoming book, to be called "Orthodoxy," proposes, I understand, to meet the objection. But, so far, almost the only exposition we have of Mr. Chesterton's own system of doctrine is to be found in the wild last chapter of "The Man who was Thursday."

It could hardly be expected that Mr. Chesterton, whose main reason for accepting Christianity was that it supplied a dogmatic system, would

Assault on the Moderns 153

look very favourably on an attempt to make it acceptable to the modern world by stripping it of its dogmas. When the Rev. R. J. Campbell electrified the churches by his preaching of the New Theology, Mr. Chesterton "went for" him with much less restraint and respect than he had exhibited in dealing with the avowedly anti-Christian polemics of Mr. Blatchford. "Your True Christianity," he wrote in a letter to the "Nation," "seems to me very like True Free Trade, which dogmatists and coarse fellows call Protection." G. K. C. undoubtedly dealt some shrewd blows at the new religious movement, which indeed sometimes laid itself dangerously open. The attempts of Mr. Campbell and others to minimize and explain away the problem of evil, their rejection of the doctrines of Original Sin and of the Fall, gave a particularly good opportunity for the controversial methods which he had used so effectively against Mr. Blatchford.

But probably his real objection to the New Theology was based upon a deeper ground.

The avowed aim of that movement was the reconciliation of Christianity with the modern world. Now, we have seen that, so far from desiring such a reconciliation, it was just his violent reaction against the modern world that had driven Mr. Chesterton into a reconciliation with Christianity. To have convinced G. K. C. that the Christian Faith could be "reconciled with modern thought" would have gone a long way towards convincing him that it was untrue.

I have mentioned "The Man who was Thursday" as containing the only exposition I know of what I may call Mr. Chesterton's constructive theology. It is, of course, a wild book—"A Nightmare"—the author calls it. But there is nothing more characteristic of G. K. C. than that he becomes farcical in proportion as he becomes serious. With the central artistic idea, which is a good one, I deal elsewhere. Here I am concerned with the last chapter only, the chapter in which the symbolism of the book is made clear. Six men, sworn to wage war on

Assault on the Moderns 155

the Anarchy of the modern world, have received their commissions from a mysterious hand in a dark room. Their unknown general appears in the story as "Sunday," the Arch-Anarchist, the man they are sworn to fight. At the end of their adventures, when his identity has been discovered, they are summoned to a great festival, and Sunday speaks to them :

" 'We will eat and drink later,' he said. 'Let us remain together a little, we who have loved each other so sadly, and have fought so long. I seem to remember only centuries of heroic war, in which you were always heroes—epic on epic, iliad on iliad, and you always brothers in arms. Whether it was but recently (for time is nothing), or at the beginning of the world, I sent you out to war. I sat in the darkness, where there is not any created thing, and to you I was only a voice commanding valour and an unnatural virtue. You heard

the voice in the dark, and you never heard it again. The sun in heaven denied it, the earth and sky denied it, all human wisdom denied it. And when I met you in the daylight I denied it myself.'

"There was complete silence in the starlit garden, and then the black-browed Secretary, implacable, turned in his chair towards Sunday, and said in a harsh voice :

"'Who and what are you ?'

"'I am the Sabbath,' said the other without moving. 'I am the peace of God.'

"The Secretary started up, and stood crushing his costly robe in his hand.

"'I know what you mean,' he cried, 'and it is exactly that that I cannot forgive you. I know you are contentment, optimism, what do they call the thing, an ultimate reconciliation. Well, I am not reconciled. If you were the man in the dark room, why were you also Sunday, an

Assault on the Moderns 157

offence to the sunlight ? If you were from the first our father and our friend, why were you also our greatest enemy ? We wept, [we fled in terror,] the iron entered into our souls—and you are the peace of God ! Oh, I can forgive God His anger, though it destroyed nations ; but I cannot forgive Him His peace.’”

Then the others, one by one, take up the complaint. One says, “ It seems so *silly* that you should have been on both sides and fought yourself.” And another, “ You let me stray a little too near to hell.” And yet another, “ I wish I knew why I was hurt so much.” And Sunday answers, “ I have heard your complaints in order. And here, I think, comes another to complain, and we will hear him also.”

Enters Gregory, the real Anarchist, and hurls his accusation at the Paladins of Order :

“ ‘ I know what you are all of you from first

to last—you are the people in power! You are the police—the great fat, smiling men in blue and buttons! You are the Law, and you have never been broken. But is there a free soul alive that does not long to break you, only because you have never been broken? We in revolt talk all kind of nonsense doubtless about this crime or that crime of the Government. It is all folly! The only crime of the Government is that it governs. /The unpardonable sin of the supreme power is that it is supreme. I do not curse you for being cruel. I do not curse you (though I might) for being kind. I curse you for being safe! You sit in your chairs of stone, and have never come down from them. You are the seven angels of heaven, and you have had no troubles. Oh, I could forgive you everything, you that rule all mankind, if I could feel for once that you had suffered for one hour a real agony such as I——’

Assault on the Moderns 159'

"Syme sprang to his feet, shaking from head to foot.

" 'I see everything,' he cried, 'everything that there is. Why does each thing on the earth war against each other thing? Why does each small thing in the world have to fight against the world itself? Why does a fly have to fight the whole universe? Why does a dandelion have to fight the whole universe? For the same reason that I had to be alone in the dreadful Council of the Days. So that each thing that obeys law may have the glory and isolation of the anarchist. So that each man fighting for order may be as brave and good a man as the dynamiter. So that the real lie of Satan may be flung back in the face of this blasphemer, so that by tears and torture we may earn the right to say to this man, "You lie!" No agonies can be too great to buy the right to say to this accuser, "We also have suffered."

“‘It is not true that we have never been broken. We have been broken upon the wheel. It is not true that we have never descended from these thrones. We have descended into hell. We were complaining of unforgettable miseries even at the very moment when this man entered insolently to accuse us of happiness. I repel the slander ; we have not been happy. I can answer for every one of the great guards of Law whom he has accused. At least——’

“He had turned his eyes so as to see suddenly the great face of Sunday, which wore a strange smile.

“‘Have you,’ he cried in a dreadful voice, ‘have you ever suffered ?’

“As he gazed the great face grew to an awful size, grew larger than the colossal mask of Memnon, which had made him scream as a child. It grew larger and larger, filling the whole sky ; then everything went black. Only in the blackness before it

Assault on the Moderns 161

entirely destroyed his brain he seemed to hear a distant voice saying a commonplace text that he had heard somewhere, 'Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of ?' "

I leave this quotation without comment. It is, I think, the best expression of the foothold of faith which G. K. C. has found for himself at the last.

CHAPTER VI

G. K. C. AS ANTI-LIBERAL

WE have seen that Mr. Chesterton, growing up in an atmosphere of theological Liberalism, has slowly thought himself out of it and become the avowed champion of a strict Catholic orthodoxy. In politics, he has not yet severed himself wholly from the traditions of his youth, but I shall endeavour to suggest that when the process of self-realisation is complete, he will come to see that just as he has become a Catholic in religion he has in effect become a Tory in politics.

The change has, I think, been hidden from Mr. Chesterton's own eyes by reason of the fact that his views on certain problems which especially interested him coincided more or less with the views of a section of the Liberal Party

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 163

and were diametrically opposed to the opinions fashionable among Conservatives. It may be noted that it is only a comparatively few items in the Liberal programme (and those the items which most Liberals studiously avoid mentioning) which have power to rouse his enthusiasm. In all his many political polemics you will hardly find a word about Free Trade or about Church Disestablishment. You will find no pleas for the reduction of armaments or for a pacific foreign policy. You will find a number of very definite protests against the current Liberal policy in relation to licensing and education. Only two Liberal principles are preached with any decision or emphasis—the principle of Nationality and the principle of Democracy.

Now the identification of Nationalism with Liberalism is an entirely modern and mainly accidental phenomenon. Irish Nationalism, for instance, which especially excites Mr. Chesterton's sympathies, was in past times associated with Toryism (the very name "Tory" means

an Irish rebel), with Jacobitism, with what Liberals call "reaction." The Boers again, whatever their claims to admiration, were certainly not Liberals in the ordinary sense of the word. They were a landed squirearchy, proud and tenacious as the slave-owners of Virginia (towards whom Mr. Chesterton is also, I believe, sympathetic), and as untouched by modern ideas in their politics as in their religion. It may also be recalled that for the hundred years at least which intervened between the English and the French Revolutions the Tory party was emphatically the Anti-Imperialist party. Indeed it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the country squire whose point of view was at the back of real Toryism was by his nature an Anti-Imperialist, absorbed in the thought of his own fireside and his own estates and indifferent to everything that did not immediately affect them. On the other hand, the larger ideas of more progressive classes tend to neglect frontiers and local customs, and to

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 165

become either cosmopolitan or Imperialist. The French Revolutionists drove the steam-roller of a highly centralized bureaucracy over the rights and franchises of the provinces with a ruthlessness which no modern Imperialist would dare to imitate, and took Belgium by a cool act of annexation, without the slightest regard for Nationalist sentiment.

Mr. Chesterton's constantly avowed belief in democracy may seem to wed him more deeply to the Liberal creed. But even in this respect the case, when examined, is by no means so clear as it at first appears.

The French Revolution is for Mr. Chesterton the fountain of Liberalism, and he is never tired of boasting himself its child. But both assumptions may be questioned. Modern English Liberalism is a mixed human product, and derived from many sources. In a sense no doubt it is a product of the French Revolution, but only because we are all its products—Tories and Socialists and Anarchists, no less than Liberals

and Radicals. Nothing after that astounding cataclysm could be quite the same as it was before it. But Liberalism existed before the Revolution, and many of its most characteristic traits can be traced to movements wholly unconnected with it. The philosophy of the eighteenth century, the tradition of the great Whig houses "that had eaten the Abbey's fruits," as Mr. Chesterton himself puts it, the Puritanism of the middle classes dating from the great struggle with the Stuarts, the economic claims of the new trading interests created by the industrial revolution, the humanitarian and pacifist idealism (characteristically un-Gallic) which Shelley and others popularized in this country—all these have gone to mould modern Liberalism, and the inheritance of each is plainly visible in its features.

The non-identity of English Liberalism with the tradition of the French Revolution can be seen by a very simple test. In the first half of the nineteenth century a party arose in this country which really was imbued with what

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 167

Frenchmen call "the principles of '89." They were called Chartists. So far from seeing in Liberalism the expression of their ideas, they were as violently Anti-Liberal as the Social Democratic Federation, and much more Anti-Liberal than the Independent Labour Party. Their hostility, it must be remembered, was by no means confined to the old-fashioned Whigs. They denounced Villiers and Bright as vehemently as Palmerston and Russell. They repeatedly broke up Free Trade meetings called by the Anti-Corn Law League. And therein they acted like true successors of the men of '93, for the French Revolutionists were all Protectionists, just as they were Conscriptionists, Unionists, Imperialists, and everything else that the modern Liberal detests.

Mr. Chesterton finds the common foundation of Liberalism and the French Revolution in Democracy. But it may well be questioned whether Democracy is an essential part of Liberalism at all. Lord Macaulay would have

justly claimed the title of Liberal ; yet he declared that if the working classes ever obtained a preponderance in the State the nation would be ruined. Robert Lowe was a lifelong Liberal ; but he looked forward with dread to the enfranchisement, even of the seven-pound householder. It is true that this Liberal opposition to democracy has ceased, but so, it might plausibly be urged, has the Conservative opposition to democracy. No one, Liberal or Tory, now ventures to say that the will of the people ought not to prevail. Even frankly aristocratic institutions like the House of Lords are now defended, as Mr. Chesterton has himself pointed out, on the rather paradoxical ground that the Peers are better interpreters of the will of the people than the Commons.

When we make anything like a careful examination of Mr. Chesterton's theory of democracy we shall find less cause than ever to identify it with the doctrine of Liberalism. Liberals have generally held high the authority of Par-

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 169

liaments, even when those Parliaments were in their composition almost entirely oligarchical. Mr. Chesterton, on the other hand, while he professes to "believe very strongly in the mass of the common people," seems always exceedingly sceptical about the value of representative assemblies. He makes it a matter of praise in Dickens that "he realized the thing that Frenchmen and Irishmen understand . . . the fact that popular government is one thing and representative government another."

His conception of democracy would seem to be satisfied by any system, however undemocratic in seeming, under which the Government was in fact conducted in harmony with the general wishes of the people. Now in all this there is nothing inconsistent with Toryism. That doctrine underlies the whole of Bolingbroke's pamphlet "The Patriot King"—perhaps the clearest exposition of the Tory philosophy that has ever appeared in this country—the doctrine that the will of the people can be carried out by other

means than those of election and representation.

Another fact which has tended to confirm Mr. Chesterton in the illusion that he is a Liberal is his love of revolutions. He is never tired of asserting the sacred right of insurrection, the necessity of blood and violence for the redemption of our civilization. In the dedicatory poem at the beginning of "The Napoleon of Notting Hill," he says, after speaking of the confident prophecies of political evolutionists :

Likelier across these flats afar,
These sulky levels, smooth and free,
The drums shall crash the valse of war
And death shall dance with liberty !
Likelier the barracades shall blare
Slaughter below and smoke above,
And death and hate and hell declare
That men have found a thing to love !

And again in criticizing (in the columns of the "Daily News") Mr. H. G. Wells's statement that Socialism would come slowly, and would not "be announced by a blast of trumpets from

Tower Hill," he asks why, if Socialism be really the redemption of mankind, it should not be so announced. "I shall not blame you," he writes, "if you blow trumpets from the Tower or fire guns from the Tower. You have blown trumpets and fired guns for much meaner things."

But here again his doctrine has no necessary connection with Liberalism. He has said quite truly that all revolutions are doctrinal, and that to lose faith in dogma is to lose faith in revolution. But it is obvious that any doctrine in which a man can believe will serve as the basis of revolution. The Jacobins rebelled for the sake of the Rights of Man, but the Jacobites rebelled as fiercely for the sake of the Divine Right of Kings. The peasants of La Vendée who guarded the passage of the Loire, the gentlemen of Lancashire who rode to Derby with Charles Edward—these also were revolutionaries. These also "had found a thing to love"—and that thing was Toryism.

The one doctrine that is thoroughly and

universally characteristic of Liberalism is the doctrine of Progress. The theory that the world is becoming gradually but inevitably better is a dogma common to Macaulay and Dickens, to Lord Rosebery and Mr. Morley, to John Bright and John Burns. It is the real sign manual of Liberalism, and it is the object of Mr. Chesterton's fiercest attacks.

In an article published in the "Independent Review" in 1905 Mr. Chesterton makes this substitution of the idea of Progress for certain defined dogmas the special heresy of the Liberal Imperialists. He wrote :

"When Liberalism met its great debacle there were necessarily two kinds of critics left in the defeated army, with two different plans of campaign, indeed, with two different conceptions of the nature of war. The first formed the coherent and philosophical Liberal Imperialist Party... the other formed the party of which I am a humble member.

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 173

The first said : 'The French Revolution succeeded because it was progressive, because it was the fresh and forward thing at that moment.' The second said : 'The French Revolution succeeded because it was religious, because it gave a key of principle which cannot grow old.' The first said : 'The old Liberals won, because they were men of their time.' The second said : 'They won because they were men of all time ; or rather, because the ideas they dealt with are outside time altogether.' The first said : 'Old Liberal ideas conquered because they were new ; but they are new no longer.' The second said : 'Not so. Old Liberal ideas conquered because they were true. And they are true still.' "

Now the analysis here given of the attitude of the first party, the Liberal Imperialists, is sound enough ; but I cannot help feeling that the second party, of which Mr. Chesterton

declares himself "a humble member," consisted exclusively of Mr. Chesterton himself, with the possible addition of Mr. Belloc. The ordinary "Pro-Boer" certainly did not repudiate the doctrine of Progress. He proclaimed it on all occasions—only he called Anti-Imperialism "progressive" and Imperialism "reactionary." Mr. Chesterton's own personal friend, Mr. Masterman, wrote an essay on the decline of the Imperialist movement, and called it "After the Reaction"—a phrase which for Mr. Chesterton and his imaginary "party" would have no meaning. The opponents of Imperialism were just as ready as their opponents to claim a monopoly in "the flowing tide," and they always endeavoured to represent the Imperialist movement as a sort of atavistic reversion to barbarism. The fact is that the doctrine of Progress is common to Liberals of every school; the only difference of opinion is as regards its application.

Mr. Chesterton diverges sharply from

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 175

Liberalism in that he repudiates altogether this identification of good and bad with progress and reaction. He has a certain vision of a normal human life, and in his view reforms and revolutions must be undertaken not for the purpose of helping mankind on its march to an unattained ideal, but in helping it back to a sanity and health away from which it is constantly tending to fall. This sanity and health (qualified, as, in his view, it always must be qualified, by permanent human imperfection) he finds, for example, in the best period of the Middle Ages, a period which he eulogizes to an extent which must startle and shock the ordinary modern man, especially when coming from a professed Liberal. But he finds the instinct for it still abiding in the great mass of the people. In an article in "The New Age" he wrote of the working classes :

" For the Revolution, if they make it, there will be all the features which they

like and I like ; the strong sense of English cosiness, the instinct for special festival, the distinction between the dignities of man and woman, responsibility of a man under his roof. If you make the Revolution it will be marked by all the things that democracy detests and I detest ; the talk about the inevitable, the love of statistics, the materialist theory of history, the trivialities of Sociology, and the uproarious folly of Eugenics. I know the answer you have ; I know the risk I run. Perhaps democracy will never move. Perhaps the English people, if you gave it beer enough, would accept even Eugenics. It is enough for me for the moment to say that I cannot believe it. The poor are so obviously right, I cannot fancy that they will never enforce their rightness against all the prigs of your party and mine . . .”

Now this belief in an ancient tradition abiding

in the mass of men may be Democracy, but it is certainly not Liberalism. If it is Democracy it is Tory Democracy. Indeed there is one of Lord Randolph Churchill's speeches about the function of the masses as the guardians of a permanent Conservative tradition, which is almost identical with many passages in Mr. Chesterton's political writings.

It is hardly necessary to point out the discrepancy between Mr. Chesterton's views and those of most Liberals on many minor matters—on the drink question, for example, and on the effectiveness of “undenominational” religious teaching. Mr. Chesterton would doubtless reply that these matters are not of the essence of Liberalism; nay, he would, perhaps, go further, and contend that what may be called the Non-conformist view of such problems is inconsistent with Liberal principles. But he has largely discounted this argument by refusing to accept it in the case of Socialists. In the article quoted above, an article called “Why I am not a

Socialist," he deliberately maintains the position that a propaganda must be judged not merely by the specific doctrine preached, but by the general temper and attitude of the preachers. Certain normal human needs he holds to be inconsistent, not so much with Socialism, but with the visions and ideals of Socialists. "I do not say these things would not occur under Socialism; I say they do not occur to Socialists." Now in such a case it is reasonable to demand one weight and one measure. It would be manifestly unfair that Socialism should be judged by the Socialists unless Liberalism is also to be judged by the Liberals. And surely Mr. Chesterton's human needs which he regards as especially important—drink, for instance, and dogma—are wholly left out of the general vision and propaganda of modern Liberalism.

"The Napoleon of Notting Hill" is Mr. Chesterton's political confession of faith. He has written many serious articles on political questions, but, just as none of his excursions

into theological controversy throw so clear a light on his fundamental religious beliefs as the "Nightmare" of "The Man who was Thursday," so none of his political essays sum up his view of politics so completely as this extravagant romance of King Auberon and Adam Wayne. It will be well, therefore, to examine it more closely.

The novel is a prophetic romance of the year 1950 or thereabouts. Men having lost their faith in doctrine, and having come to believe in "a thing called Evolution," have allowed things to drift until a dull oligarchy governs the whole world, its prosaic disillusionment being admirably illustrated by the fact that the despotic King who is at its head is selected like a juryman from an alphabetical rotation list of the governing classes. Unfortunately the lot falls on one Auberon Quinn, a humorist who resolves to use his despotic powers for the purpose of forcing his subjects to assume all the splendour and ritual of feudal times. With

this intent he frames the Charter of Cities whereby the various districts of London are provided with Lord High Provosts, flags, city guards with uniforms and halberds, and even with heroic legends conceived by the expansive imagination of King Auberon. The respectable vestrymen who have to perform these antics are annoyed, but they are obliged to acquiesce and go sullenly on with their work. The principal task before them at the moment is the construction of a great road from Westbourne Grove to Hammersmith Broadway. But their schemes are suddenly upset by the appearance of a young man named Adam Wayne, to whom the King's joke is a serious thing, a religion. Having become Provost of Notting Hill, he refuses to allow the road to pass through his Free City, and especially objects to a sacrilegious hand being laid upon Pump Street, to which he feels an especially passionate patriotic devotion. Instantly all the forgotten enthusiasms, which men had thought to have vanished

from the world for ever when the last Dervishes were exterminated and when the last little Republic in South America was absorbed, flare up and destroy the empire of Modernity. Nottingham defends itself like Athens, hurls back its enemies, and finally infects the other London districts with its own fiery patriotism and romance. The King's joke has redeemed the world.

With the literary quality of the story I shall deal in another chapter. What concerns us here is its political doctrine, and in this aspect there are several interesting points to be noted.

First of all it is characteristic of Mr. Chesterton that, while most writers who have endeavoured to sketch the future of humanity instinctively conceive it as better than the present, he as instinctively thinks of it as worse. Until men definitely make up their minds to change the world, the world will steadily deteriorate. So far from Progress being the law of life, the law

of life is Degeneration. Satan is the Prince of this World.

Then we may observe that the things which Mr. Chesterton selects as the symbols of oppression are the modern things, the progressive things. Buck and Barker, the villains of the piece, are not dull and reactionary landlords or oligarchs obstructing the march of reform. They might quite reasonably be represented as enlightened and public-spirited citizens, intent on a public improvement.

Lastly we may note that the sanctity in defence of which Adam Wayne draws the sword is nothing less than our old friend "the sanctity of private property." No doubt Wayne's enthusiasm for the rights of property is untainted by the sordid desire for gain and power which often prompts such enthusiasm. No doubt also he proves his sincerity by carrying it to lengths from which the most obscurantist member of the Liberty and Property Defence League would shrink. No sane Conservative that I

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 183

have ever heard of, however much he might denounce the mildest measures of social reform as robbery and confiscation, ever suggested that the State had not the right, after giving full compensation, to take private property for the purposes of a public improvement. Yet Adam Wayne (and apparently Mr. Chesterton also) is willing to deluge Western London with blood rather than admit such a right. Of course, it may be suggested that I am taking the fantastic politics of King Auberon's realm too seriously. But, when all allowance has been made for legitimate exaggeration, the fact remains that the cause for which Adam Wayne was willing to shed oceans of blood was the cause of property. He is less the Napoleon than the Penrhyn of Notting Hill. No one who had read "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" with reasonable care and intelligence had any right to be surprised when Mr. Chesterton proclaimed himself an opponent of Socialism.

I have already dealt with Mr. Chesterton's

attitude towards the idea of Progress, and I need say no more on the subject. But a word may be said with advantage about his hatred of the civic type represented in his tale by Barker and Buck, because that hatred, though it seems to ally him with the cause of democracy, is really, I think, only another sign of his fundamental Toryism.

Mr. Chesterton undoubtedly dislikes the moneyed man, the commercial magnate, the capitalist. This dislike seems to many to imply democracy, but it might equally well imply very old-fashioned Toryism. The alliance of such men with Conservatism is a very recent phenomenon. Down to the middle of the nineteenth century at least they were nearly all Liberals. When commercial interests first began to exercise power in this country that power was always on the Whig or Liberal side. The Tory party from the seventeenth century onwards fought it tooth and nail, and the fight was continued by the bulk of the party even

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 185

after their leader Peel had gone over to the commercialists. It was only when Toryism was transformed into Conservatism and lost some of its most characteristic features in the process that it became a possible party for capitalists and traders.

The doctrine of property stated in "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" and elsewhere, is, as I have said, markedly opposed to the modern tendency which we call Collectivism. It is true that Mr. Chesterton does not like the present state of wealth and poverty. As he himself has put it, "No one but Satan or Beelzebub could like the present state of wealth and poverty." But the remedy, in his view, is not to deny property, but to assert it. "It is the negation of property that the Duke of Westminster should own whole streets and squares of London; just as it would be the negation of marriage if he had all living women in one great harem." Mr. Chesterton would like a state in which each man should own his own land

and his own tools, and, I think, he would permit no tools too large or complex for a single man to own and use them.

Indeed, there is in Mr. Chesterton's later work a tone towards machinery which reminds one sometimes of Ruskin. He seems to see, not merely in the abuse of machinery, not merely in its ownership and exploitation by a limited class, but in the machinery itself a menace to the human soul. He believes, one gathers, that it tends to give men a sense of large knowledge when they have no knowledge, a sense of great power when they have no power.

“ . . . And under all this vast illusion of the cosmopolitan planet, with its empires and its Reuter's agency, the real life of man goes on concerned with this tree or that temple, with this harvest or that drinking-song, totally uncomprehended, totally untouched. And it watches from its splendid parochialism, possibly with a

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 187

smile of amusement, motor-car civilization going its triumphant way, outstripping time, consuming space, seeing all and seeing nothing, roaring on at last to the capture of the solar system, only to find the sun cockney and the stars suburban."

These feelings seem to have begun to affect him very early. In the essay on "The Patriotic Idea" in "England a Nation," written before his political creed had developed along lines antagonistic to modern Progressivism, we find a passage instinct with dislike and distrust of modern invention :

"There is a decadence possible for our modern civilization, and it is just at this point that my difference from the Imperialists comes in. They think Imperialism (otherwise Cosmopolitanism) is the cure. I think that Imperialism (otherwise Cosmopolitanism) is the disease. I ignore for the moment the question of whether, in the ab-

stract, combinations and centralizations and steamboats and Marconi wires are good things or bad. But to attempt to cure the evil of Birmingham and save the soul of Chicago by more combinations and centralizations and more steamboats and more Marconi wires seems to me stark lunacy; it is like a doctor ordering brandy to a man in delirium tremens. It is precisely from these things that we are suffering—from a loose journalism, from a vague geography, from an excitable smattering of everything, from an officious interest in everybody, from a loss of strong national types, of strong religious restraints, of the sense of memory, and the fear of God. We are not suffering from any very painful or dangerous resemblance to the arrogant and cruel zealots who ruled in Sparta or died in the fall of Jerusalem. We are suffering from a resemblance to the mob in decaying Rome.”

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 189

This attitude is the more curious because you would rather expect to find Mr. Chesterton, with his continual deification of the human will, and his refusal to admit that any obedience is due to Nature from Man, to regard the victories of Man over Nature with approving eyes. He actually did so in the days of "The Wild Knight," as witness the poems on "King's Cross Station" and "The Lamp-post." I think he would do so still if you confined the question to Man's earlier triumphs. The plough, the axe, the ship, the arch, and the sword he would, I am sure, still acclaim enthusiastically as witnesses to the godlike supremacy of Man. But when you bring him face to face with the steam engine and the telephone his tone becomes dubious and even hostile. Even in things mechanical he has become a Tory.

Note again his Tory love of authority and of permanent tradition. This is almost the central idea of "The Man who was Thursday," where a new police force is organized to fight against

Anarchism. It is true that the Anarchy to be combatted is rather the moral and intellectual Anarchy of modern thought symbolically treated than the ordinary political Anarchy with which we are familiar. But all the same the sympathies of the author are on the side of the police. Of course a man need not be a Tory in order not to be an Anarchist. But the man who instinctively feels the peril of Society to lie in the direction of Anarchy is an instinctive Tory, as the man who instinctively feels its peril to lie in the direction of slavery is an instinctive Liberal. Mr. Chesterton clearly belongs to the former class of mind.

In the course of the controversy in "The New Age" which raged round the article above referred to, Mr. Chesterton was challenged by both Mr. Wells and Mr. Shaw to "plank down his Utopia." He declined the invitation, but I think that any reasonably intelligent and industrious student of his writings could frame one for him. His ideal state would be very

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 191

small—perhaps no larger than Notting Hill. Its population would be either peasant farmers owning each his own land or craftsmen working each in his own workshop. They would be devout Catholics, keen patriots, and heavy drinkers. Such a state is clearly not the ideal aimed at by modern Liberals. It is certainly nearer to (though not identical with) the older Tory ideal. It would imply almost necessarily such Tory proposals as Conscription and Protection—not, of course, Imperial Protection, but National or possibly Civic Protection. If Notting Hill is to have a City Wall, why not a City Tariff?

I may mention in passing that my view may find some confirmation in the amusing dialogues which Mr. Chesterton contributed to the "Fortnightly Review," wherein a Tory, a Socialist, and an Irish Nationalist discussed public affairs month by month. Liberated by the dramatic form from the necessity of pretending to be a Liberal, the author threw himself into the views

of the Tory Colonel with unconcealed gusto, and generally gave him (to my way of thinking, at least) the best of the debate. It is notable that no really typical representative of Liberalism was introduced. Mr. Chesterton could not so completely change his skin.

I cannot leave Mr. Chesterton's politics without referring to one subject which has been much before the public lately, and upon which he holds strong and what would generally be described as reactionary opinions. I mean the question of the political status of women.

It has been noted by many that "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" does not introduce a single woman from beginning to end. "The Man who was Thursday" does contain a woman, but she is a mere influence, doing nothing herself, but vaguely supposed to be inspiring other people to do things—in a word, the romantically-conceived Queen of Love and Beauty. It would be unfair to call Mr. Chesterton an Anti-Feminist, for his doctrine is rather one of the division of

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 193

labour between the sexes than of the exaltation of one sex above the other. But he is certainly a pronounced opponent of the modern movement for the political enfranchisement of women. His statement of the case against it has, at any rate, the virtue of originality, and is worth a moment's thought. Democratic politics, he says, rest on comradeship, that is, on the recognition of a certain affinity with men in the lump. But women have no capacity for comradeship. They can love individuals, but they cannot feel a casual yet genial interest in people generally. "They understand everything," he wrote in the "Illustrated London News," "except three things—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." Therefore they are unfitted for politics. I do not propose to argue the question here, or to express my own views on it. But I may remark that it appears to me a tenable criticism that Mr. Chesterton does not sufficiently distinguish between the natural and the acquired characteristics of womanhood. It is quite true that

few ordinary women are capable of what Mr. Chesterton calls comradeship. But it is also true that where women are leading a type of life approximating to the masculine type—women in the theatrical world, for example—the capacity for it does develop in them. Mr. Chesterton would quite possibly say that such a development was undesirable; but that is not the point. What that development does seem to show is that incapacity for comradeship is rather a result of the present training and life of women than an innate limitation of the sex.

I think also that inconsistency seems to exist between Mr. Chesterton's denial to the woman of the present day of a claim to a public career, and his admiration of women who in past ages carried that claim to the most extreme point. Of no women has he written with more enthusiasm than of Catherine of Siena who held in her hand all the complicated threads of Italian politics, or of Joan of Arc who, dressed in a man's armour, led great armies to victory. Surely it is a rather

G. K. C. as Anti-Liberal 195

strange position that a modern woman may not vote for a vestryman while a mediæval woman might negotiate a treaty or direct a campaign.

Briefly, I think we may summarize Mr. Chesterton's politics by saying that he is a Tory of the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, born out of his due time. In the Cabinet of Bolingbroke he would have found quite a sympathetic atmosphere. He would have found men, by comparison with their opponents at any rate, sympathetic with the national aspirations of the native Irish. He would have found men who disliked Imperialism and foreign complications, and held that our fleets and armies ought to confine their energies to the defence of the actual soil of England. He would have found men who hated plutocracy and the power of riches created by trade, who loved the life of the cornfields and desired a free peasantry. But, alas! he was born two centuries too late, and by dint of keeping so far behind his time has acquired the reputation of an advanced Radical.

CHAPTER VII

A TELLER OF TALES

WE have more than once had occasion to remark that the key to nearly all Mr. Chesterton's merits and defects is to be found in the combative and propagandist impulse which is at the back of nearly all his work. He has been throughout not an artist seeking for the most perfect instrument of self-expression, but a soldier seeking the most effective engine of destruction. He tried to preach his crusade in verse; he tried to preach it in prose. In "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" and the tales which have followed it he tried to use for the same purpose the very old method of parable or fable.

It is very necessary that this should be understood, because without it both the intention and

the achievement of the stories will be wholly misjudged. They are not novels—I will not say in the ordinary sense, but in any sense based upon a sound critical classification of art-forms. It is not the mere extravagance of the incidents that makes the difference. A story may have a wildly impossible plot, like “The Dynamiter” or “The Wrong Box,” or, for the matter of that, “Wuthering Heights,” and yet be a novel. But all novels, realistic or fantastic or semi-supernatural, have this in common, that they show life as an interplay of human personalities and temperaments. Mr. Chesterton’s tales, on the other hand, show life as an interplay of spiritual forces transcending humanity, of which the human characters are merely the embodiments. They are not novels, but mysteries.

It is natural Mr. Chesterton’s stories should be mysteries—stories in which life is shown as a conflict of spiritual forces—because he really sees life in that way. Indeed, his judgment is often warped by his tendency to see only ideas when

others see only persons. Modern politics, for instance, are, at present, almost wholly personal, being concerned with the contest between two teams of statesmen into whose conflicts principles enter hardly more than they do into the Oxford and Cambridge boat race. Yet for a long while Mr. Chesterton insisted on reading into the struggle between the Outs and the Ins a set battle between rival doctrines of the State.

There have been signs of late, since his growing fame has enabled him to see something of politics from the inside, that he has begun to understand the true state of the case. But the effect of this knowledge upon him has not been to make him modify his rigid idealism, but it has rather led him to regard current politics with increasing apathy and distaste.

If indeed he were only an Idealist (I use the word in the Platonic rather than in the current sense) he would probably have been content to express his views directly in the form of essays. But he is a peculiar and rare combination, a

Romantic Idealist. Usually the Romantic sees persons much more clearly than ideas; one remembers how Carlyle, the most romantic of historians, exaggerated the importance of personalities in history, and underrated the influence of doctrines. Mr. Chesterton's intellect sees ideas more clearly than persons, yet his temperament leads him to think about ideas as romantically as romanticists think about persons. He wants to give every idea a feather and a sword, and a trumpet to blow and a good ringing voice to speak. From this eccentric wedding—of Idealism and Romance, is born the Chestertonian novel.

Without the romance, indeed, Mr. Chesterton's stories would be lost. For he does not possess at all the specific talent of the dramatist-novelist, the power, I mean, of creating characters who talk and act from within. It was the possession of this power in the highest degree of genius that saved Ibsen's symbolic plays from dullness. Ibsen's sense of individual char-

acter was so intense that even when he began by conceiving a man as a mere symbol, the living man grew under his hand. He could not help clothing every figure he introduced with a vivid and unmistakable human character, and endowing it with language and action absolutely native and appropriate. Mr. Chesterton never does this—never really attempts it. He never creates figures who talk or act from within, whose quality and dialect is their own and not their author's. Throughout "The Napoleon of Notting Hill," still more throughout "The Man who was Thursday," every one is talking in the Chesterton style, even when he is repudiating the Chesterton doctrines. Read the long exposition of Barker of the virtues of the "alphabetical monarchy" which he serves. The opinions are the opinions of Barker, but the voice is the voice of G. K. C. It is not in the least the way in which Barker would talk—Barker, who is supposed to be a dull and decorous official. He would not defend his

Handwritten note:
The Napoleon of Notting Hill
The Man who was Thursday

dull and decorous opinions with such a wealth of paradox. Nor are the speeches of Buck, the "great man of business," in the least like anything that Buck could be conceived as saying. The only two people who are always themselves, and who talk and act from within, are Wayne and Auberon, and that is because Wayne and Auberon are the two lobes of Mr. Chesterton's brain.

And yet it remains true that the stories are almost Mr. Chesterton's best, as they are quite his most characteristic work. "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" is, I am inclined to think, quite his best. And this is because the tales, and that tale in particular, though the characters are for the most part but embodied opinions, are so drenched with romance, with colour, movement, humour, and animal spirits and show, moreover, so genuine a gift of pure story-telling, that it is quite impossible for the sternest artistic critic to resist the fascination.

Mr. Chesterton was not mistaken in his

vocation when he set out to write stories. He is a born story-teller, which is quite a different thing from being a born novelist. The old trade of story-telling is, as he himself has said, a much older thing than the modern art of fiction. The Oriental who spread his carpet in the marketplace, the medieval bard who sang a ballad at his master's feast, made no appeal to that curiosity about the varieties of the human soul which is increasingly the inspiration of the modern novel. If he touched on human psychology at all he dealt only with those primal passions and desires which are common to all normal men. But, for the interest of his art, he depended simply upon his capacity to tell a good story, and to tell it well. In the last resort, Mr. Chesterton's novels depend for their interest on the same power.

Take "The Napoleon of Notting Hill." It not only lacks the subtle qualities of fiction. It is not, even of its kind, an artistic whole. There are pages of insanity, pages of horse-

play, pages of swash-buckling slaughter, pages of thoroughly undramatic discussion. But the whole is carried forward by the mere zest of the author for his narrative. From the moment that the story is fairly launched it never flags or stops till it has reached its consummation. From the moment, especially, when the fighting begins, there is never one pause, never one slackening of the tension, never one moment in which to take breath and remember one's common sense.

This is really something of a tour de force, because the fighting is avowedly preposterous and farcical. A war between modern suburbs conducted with seventeenth-century halberds is not at first sight a thing that anyone can be expected to take seriously. It is a genuine triumph that, as you read it, you do take it seriously. You forget for the moment everything serious and modern, and agonize, as did King Auberon, with alternate hope and fear over the extravagant fight round the Water

Works Tower. When the great and really unexpected climax comes, and Wayne and his few exhausted followers, outnumbered by fifteen or sixteen to one, and clinging desperately to their last refuge on Campden Hill, reduces the vast army of the south to instant submission by threatening to open the reservoir and flood the streets thirty feet deep in water, one is simply too stunned to remember for the moment the absurdity of the London Water Board's property being used for such a purpose. One forgets the exuberant folly of the whole story as men forgot the exuberant folly of King Auberon. Adam Wayne with his "uncanny blue eyes," has hypnotized us as he hypnotized the King and all his subjects.

The best parts of "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" are the battles, and especially the last great battle in Hyde Park, where the Empire of Notting Hill is ultimately overthrown. The last fight of Wayne, when all his followers have fallen around him, is a passage that will bear

quoting, for it is a vigorous example of Mr. Chesterton's manner when his blood is up :

“With a shout the West Kensington men closed round Wayne, the great yellow banner flapping over his head.

“ ‘Where is your favour now, Provost ? ’ cried the West Kensington leader.

“And a laugh went up.

“Adam struck at the standard-bearer and brought him reeling forward. As the banner stooped, he grasped the yellow folds and tore off a shred. A halberdier struck him on the shoulder, wounding bloodily.

“ ‘Here is one colour ! ’ he cried, pushing the yellow into his belt ; ‘and here ! ’ he cried, pointing to his own blood—‘here is the other.’

“At the same instant the shock of a sudden and heavy halberd laid the King stunned or dead. In the wild visions of vanishing consciousness he saw again something that belonged to an utterly forgotten

time, something that he had seen somewhere long ago in a restaurant. He saw, with his swimming eyes, red and yellow, the colours of Nicaragua.

“Quin did not see the end. Wilson, wild with joy, sprang again at Adam Wayne, and the great sword of Notting Hill was whirled above once more. Then men ducked instinctively at the rushing noise of the sword coming down out of the sky, and Wilson of Bayswater was smashed and wiped down upon the floor like a fly. Nothing was left of him but a wreck ; but the blade that had broken him was broken. In dying he had snapped the great sword and the spell of it ; the sword of Wayne was broken at the hilt. One rush of the enemy carried Wayne by force against the tree. They were too close to use halberd or even sword ; they were breast to breast, even nostrils to nostrils. But Buck got his dagger free.

✓

“‘Kill him!’ he cried, in a strange stifled voice. ‘Kill him! Good or bad, he is none of us! Do not be blinded by the face! . . . God! have we not been blinded all along!’ and he drew his arm back for a stab, and seemed to close his eyes.

“Wayne did not drop the hand that hung on to the tree-branch. But a mighty heave went over his breast and his whole huge figure, like an earthquake over great hills. And with that convulsion of effort he rent the branch out of the tree, with tongues of torn wood; and, swaying it once only, he let the splintered club fall on Buck, breaking his neck. The planner of the Great Road fell face foremost dead, with his dagger in a grip of steel.”

Romanticism is in Mr. Chesterton's bones. It leads him not only to worship the good romantic writers—Scott and Dumas and Stevenson—but to devour even bad romantic writers, if no others are available. He goes about London

with his pockets stuffed with sixpenny books and penny magazines, which it would seem incredible that any man of his literary status should look at, merely because there is plenty of blood and combat in them. He is particularly fond of detective stories. And out of that enthusiasm grew, I fancy, the idea of his latest novel.

Mr. Chesterton is a lover of detective stories. But he is also a mystic and a philosopher. It occurs to him, I should imagine, that it would be rather fun to write a philosophic detective story.

He first played with the idea in a series of short stories called "The Club of Queer Trades," dealing, as the title implies, with a society, every member of which has to have invented the profession by which he earns his living. One is the founder of an "Adventure and Romance Agency," for surrounding the lives of its subscribers with thrilling and melodramatic incidents. Another was an "Organizer of Repartee," who allowed himself to be scored off publicly by his employers,

whose epigrams were invented and led up to by their victim. Some of these stories were exceedingly good ; one in particular, " The Awful Reason of the Vicar's Visit," showed, not only Mr. Chesterton's usual qualities of energy and humour, but a certain careful artistry which is not so commonly his. But the chief connecting link between the stories with which I am here concerned is the creation of a sort of transcendental Sherlock Holmes, who probes mysteries, not by attention to facts and clues, but by understanding the spiritual atmosphere. Thus, when in the story of the Adventure and Romance Agency a letter is produced, found upon the mysterious assailant of Major Brown, beginning " Dear Mr. Plover—I am annoyed to hear that some delay has occurred in the arrangements *re* Major Brown. Please see that he is attacked as per arrangement to-morrow," etc. etc., Basil Grant confines himself to remarking, " I don't think it's the sort of letter one criminal would write to another."

“‘Facts,’ murmured Basil, like one mentioning some strange, far-off animals, ‘how facts obscure the truth. I may be silly—in fact, I’m off my head—but I never could believe in that man—what’s his name, in those capital stories?—Sherlock Holmes. Every detail points to something, certainly; but generally to the wrong thing. Facts point in all directions, it seems to me, like the thousands of twigs on a tree. It’s only the life of the tree that has unity and goes up—only the green blood that springs, like a fountain, at the stars.’”

But the possibilities⁶ of the philosophic detective story were not exhausted with “The Club of Queer Trades.” Why should not the universe itself be the subject of a detective story? After all, the essence of a detective story is that certain facts are known of which the cause and explanation is hidden. And that, when one comes to think of it, is the essence of our knowledge of the universe. “The Man

who was Thursday” is a detective story in which the criminal to be hunted and brought to bay is—God.

The idea is a good one. So is the subsidiary idea, the gradual realization that the whole wild story is a dream. By making each chapter just the slightest shade more incredible than the last, Mr. Chesterton gets a really harmonious gradation from the comparatively possible scene between the two poets to the pursuit of the flying President, where the atmosphere of a nightmare is very skilfully caught. Also there are good incidental scenes sometimes ending with a really strong and unexpected climax, such as that where Syme and his companions imagine the whole of civilization to have gone over to the side of Anarchy. That chapter, as also the one in which Syme is pursued by the paralytic professor, is an excellent example of Mr. Chesterton’s gift of rapid and entertaining story-telling. But there is nothing in the book that one remembers as one remembers the fight

round the Water Tower or the scene where Wayne flings his great sword at the feet of King Auberon.

As for the defects in characterization on which I have already commented, they are more conspicuous than ever. Mr. Chesterton evidently intended to differentiate the characters of the six detectives, but except, perhaps, in the case of Dr. Bull, it is given up almost as soon as it is attempted. When they are supposed to be Anarchists they are distinct and vivid enough, for then their externals only are described, and the author has a quick and picturesque eye for externals. When, however, they all turn out to be detectives, they all at the same moment turn out to be Mr. Chesterton! They do not again become distinct until the last chapter but one, when they describe severally how Sunday (in other words, the Universe) appears to them. And here they are only real because they have ceased to be human beings and become embodied points of view.

As Mr. Chesterton saved "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" by his instinct for Romance and his gift for spirited narration, so he saves "The Man who was Thursday" by his keen sense of fun and his indomitable *joie de vivre*. There are whole chapters that are driven forward by mere force of animal spirits. A good example is the scene where Syme, who has been indulging freely in what Mr. Chesterton has called "the traditional drink of our civilization," makes his preparation for challenging the Marquis de Saint Eustache.

"I shall approach. Before taking off his hat, I shall take off my own. I shall say, 'The Marquis de Saint Eustache, I believe.' He will say, 'The celebrated Mr. Syme, I presume.' He will say in the most exquisite French, 'How are you?' I shall reply in the most exquisite cockney, 'Oh, just the Syme——'"

"Oh, shut it!' said the man in spectacles. 'Pull yourself together, and chuck away

that bit of paper. What are you really going to do ? ’

“ ‘But it was a lovely catechism,’ said Syme pathetically. ‘Do let me read it you. It has only forty-three questions and answers, and some of the Marquis’s answers are wonderfully witty. I like to be just to my enemy.’

“ ‘But what’s the good of it all ? ’ asked Dr. Bull in exasperation.

“ ‘It leads up to my challenge, don’t you see ? ’ said Syme, beaming. ‘When the Marquis has given the thirty-ninth reply, which runs——’

“ ‘Has it by any chance occurred to you,’ asked the Professor, with a ponderous simplicity, ‘that the Marquis may not say all the forty-three things you have put down for him ? In that case, I understand, your own epigrams may appear somewhat more forced.’

“ Syme struck the table with a radiant face.

“ ‘Why, how true that is,’ he said, ‘and I never thought of it. Sir, you have an intellect beyond the common. You will make a name.’

“ ‘Oh, you’re as drunk as an owl!’ said the Doctor.”

Then comes the actual challenge :

“ ‘This man has insulted me!’ said Syme, with gestures of explanation.

“ ‘Insulted you?’ cried the gentleman with the red rosette, ‘when?’

“ ‘Oh, just now,’ said Syme recklessly. ‘He insulted my mother.’

“ ‘Insulted your mother!’ exclaimed the gentleman incredulously.

“ ‘Well, anyhow,’ said Syme, conceding a point, ‘my aunt.’

“ ‘But how can the Marquis have insulted your aunt just now?’ said the second gentleman with some legitimate wonder. ‘He has been sitting here all the time.’

“‘Ah, it was what he said!’ said Syme darkly.

“‘I said nothing at all,’ said the Marquis, ‘except something about the band. I only said that I liked Wagner played well.’

“‘It was an allusion to my family,’ said Syme firmly. ‘My aunt played Wagner badly. It was a painful subject. We are always being insulted about it.’

“‘This seems most extraordinary,’ said the gentleman who was *décoré*, looking doubtfully at the Marquis.

“‘Oh, I assure you,’ said Syme earnestly, ‘the whole of your conversation was simply packed with sinister allusions to my aunt’s weaknesses.’

“‘This is nonsense!’ said the second gentleman. ‘I for one have said nothing for half an hour, except that I liked the singing of that girl with black hair.’

“‘Well, there you are again!’ said Syme indignantly. ‘My aunt’s was red.’

“‘It seems to me,’ said the other, ‘that you are simply seeking a pretext to insult the Marquis.’

“‘By George!’ said Syme, facing round and looking at him, ‘what a clever chap you are!’”

“‘The Man who was Thursday’ is not so good a book as “The Napoleon of Notting Hill.” Yet one feels it was planned to be a better book. It is more lucidly conceived and in some ways more carefully written. It has two coherent artistic ideas which are genuinely good artistic ideas of their kind and admirably suited to Mr. Chesterton’s method. Yet, after the former book, it is disappointing. In “The Napoleon of Notting Hill” Mr. Chesterton was wildly irresponsible, yet he produced a masterpiece. In “The Man who was Thursday” he took his art much more seriously. Yet he produced something which by comparison may be described as a failure.

From this it would seem that it would be unwise to urge Mr. Chesterton to write more carefully or to be on his guard against his characteristic faults. The faults are certainly there, but one fears that an attempt to correct them might only lead to the sacrifice of those vital qualities which will keep his stories alive after many more perfectly artistic stories have perished. In imaginative writing, at any rate, Mr. Chesterton is never better than when, as in the best parts of "The Napoleon of Notting Hill," he gives his romantic and humorous imagination full rein, and lets it carry him by what wild and perilous paths it will.

One cannot leave Mr. Chesterton's imaginative work without noticing that there is one art-form which he has left untried. Mr. Bernard Shaw has repeatedly and publicly urged him to try his hand at writing for the stage; but so far he has remained deaf to such entreaties. Except for "The Wild Knight," a poem written in his early youth, and obviously never intended

for representation, he has written nothing which is dramatic even in form.

Personally I regret this abstention on his part, and hope it will not be permanent. It is quite true that his qualities are not those which go to the construction either of the ordinary "well-made" play or of the great drama of human character. But these two do not exhaust the possible types of drama any more than the novels of Miss Braddon and those of Mr. George Meredith (neither of which Mr. Chesterton could write) exhaust the possible types of fiction. In story-writing he has got over the difficulty by inventing a new kind of novel to suit himself. There is no reason why he should not do the same in relation to the stage.

It should encourage Mr. Chesterton that he might bear a part in restoring another popular but despised, and in its present state largely despicable art to fine uses. Just as "The Man who was Thursday" is a sublimated detective story, so I can imagine Mr. Chesterton writing

... a sublimated musical comedy which would take the world by storm. Musical comedy, with its freedom from necessity of external or psychological realism, and its abundant opportunities for humour, imagination, and romance, would suit him down to the ground. If he could find a composer who suited him as well as Sullivan suited Sir William Gilbert he might do great things.

Failing this, might not we have from Mr. Chesterton some prose phantasy on the lines of "The Napoleon" or "The Man who was Thursday"? The stage gives a specially good opportunity for that direct appeal to the emotions that Mr. Chesterton's romantic method implies, while it almost requires a simplification of psychology which would cover his weaknesses more than written fiction does. He would have to write with his eye on the stage, and that would imply learning a new trade, but his quick power of visualizing his scenes should make such learning easy to him.

A Teller of Tales 221

Of course he would have to be given a free hand to preach his philosophy. We cannot imagine G. K. C. ceasing to be controversial. His songs in musical comedy, his dialogue in prose drama, like his poems, his essays, and his stories, would be full of fight. For when he ceases to fight he will cease to be G. K. C. At that moment he may become a classic, but I for one shall no longer read him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GLADIATOR AS ARTIST

MR. CHESTERTON has tried his hand upon almost every description of literary work which man can attempt: essays, criticisms, religious controversy, political polemic, biography, fiction, and poetry. One quality alone is common to all, the fact that whether as critic, as novelist, or as poet, he is incurably and impenitently didactic. In this he is thoroughly consistent with his own doctrine, for no man has ever spoken with more scorn of the doctrine of "Art for Art's Sake." He has repeatedly denied that for art's sake any great art can be produced. "Just as this repudiation of big words and big visions," he says in "Heretics," "has brought forth a race of small men in politics, so it has brought forth a race of small

The Gladiator as Artist 223

men in the arts. . . . Our new artistic philosophers call for the same moral licence, for a freedom to wreck heaven and earth with their energy; but the upshot of it all is that a mediocrity is Poet Laureate." And again, later in the same book—"In the *fin de siècle* atmosphere every one was crying out that literature should be free from all causes and all ethical creeds. Art was to produce only exquisite workmanship, and it was especially the note of those days to demand brilliant plays and brilliant short stories. And when they got them they got them from a pair of moralists. The best short stories were written by a man trying to preach Imperialism; the best plays were written by a man trying to preach Socialism. All the art of all the artists looked tiny and tedious beside the art which was a by-product of propaganda." Whether Mr. Chesterton's theory in this matter be right or wrong, he has at any rate carried it into practice. His own art is certainly a by-product of propaganda. Beauty and wit, rhe-

toric and creative energy—these things to him are not ornaments, but weapons.

And yet it is a curious fact that it is Mr. Chesterton's artistic qualities, and not his message, which create the unity of his work. Most writers, indeed most artists of all kinds, retain their root point of view all through their lives, while they continually modify their mode of expression. Mr. Chesterton, on the other hand, has, as we have seen, almost wholly outgrown the opinions which were his when he first emerged into notice, but his method of conveying them has hardly varied by a hair's-breadth. Take a passage from "The Defendant" and put it side by side with a passage from "Heretics," or with his last week's article in the "Daily News" or the "Illustrated." You will very likely find a considerable change in the opinions expressed; in the mode of expression you will find no change, and even in the technique little improvement. A very able critic, who was also a great admirer of Mr. Chesterton, told me the other day that

he considered "The Defendant" still held the field as his best work, and, after carefully re-reading it, I am unable to say that it is an untenable view. Different people will prefer different books according to their individual tastes, but it may safely be said that all the artistic qualities which Mr. Chesterton's admirers like in his later work will be found in as full a measure in his first volume as in his last.

Mr. Chesterton is generally regarded as primarily a humorist, and unquestionably his humour is the freshest and most original quality of his work. Humour is probably the most difficult thing in the world to analyse. As Mr. Chesterton himself says of Dickens, "Perfect absurdity is a direct thing, like physical pain or a strong smell." Mr. Chesterton's humour generally consists in the sudden and violent introduction of a grotesque image when it is least expected. In the conception of such images he really, I think, reaches most unmistakably the mark of genius. Such a matter can only be indicated by examples.

In an entirely serious article in the "Daily News," in defence of what may be called the romantic view of politics, he contrasted "the great rhetoricians who beat Napoleon" with "the strong silent men who could not catch De Wet." I do not know whether the image of those "strong silent men" sends everybody into fits of laughter, as it sends me. As Mr. Chesterton says, "A joke is a direct thing." But, to me, that is almost the most perfect sentence Mr. Chesterton ever wrote. Another example I may give from "Heretics," a particularly good case, which deserves quoting at length, because it shows how the seriousness and even eloquence of the context can make a grotesque image more wildly and shatteringly funny :

" . . . When Christianity was heavily bombarded in the last century, upon no point was it more persistently and brilliantly attacked than upon that of its alleged enmity to human joy. Shelley and Swin-

The Gladiator as Artist 227

burne and all their armies have passed again and again over the ground, but they have not altered it. They have not set up a single new trophy or ensign for the world's merriment to rally to. They have not given a name or a new occasion to gaiety. Mr. Swinburne does not hang up his stocking on the eve of the birthday of Victor Hugo. *Mr. William Archer does not sing carols descriptive of the infancy of Ibsen outside people's doors in the snow."*

There is another artistic quality in Mr. Chesterton's work which bears a close analogy to his type of humour, but for which, as yet, criticism has found no name. I can only indicate it by saying that just as he can produce a supremely humorous effect by the sudden introduction of a grotesque image into a serious passage, so he often gets an effect extraordinarily thrilling by the sudden introduction into a passage apparently trivial of a reference to some-

thing felt by most people to be profoundly solemn and moving. He is particularly fond of using the Bible in this way; indeed, there was never so accomplished a blasphemer as this strenuous defender of the faith. The explanation of this fact may be perhaps that which he gives in "Heretics." "Blasphemy depends on belief, and is fading with it. If anyone doubts this let him sit down seriously and try to think blasphemous thoughts about Thor." Anyhow, Mr. Chesterton's skill in using the Bible in a startling manner is unquestionable. The most striking example of it will be found in the "Dickens," where he is blaming the novelist for granting to Micawber a prosperous ending :

"But how did it happen, how could it happen that the man who created this Micawber could pension him off at the end of the story, and make him a successful Colonial mayor ? Micawber never did succeed, never ought to succeed ; *his kingdom is not of this world.*"

The Gladiator as Artist 229

There is also a passage in "Heretics" about "the drunkard's liver of the New Testament which is marred for us, which we take in remembrance of him," a passage which has naturally shocked many, but which seems to me profoundly right and exceedingly dramatic.

Many who have been accustomed to think of Mr. Chesterton as a modern and an artistic rebel, a lover of the grotesque in poetry, a romantic and a mystic, must have been surprised in reading his essay on Pope in "Twelve Types" to notice the unstinted praise which he gives to the coldest and most correct of English classical poets. I think the explanation of his admiration for Pope may be found in his liking for those sharp antitheses in which Pope loved to indulge.

And without sneering teach the rest to sneer,

or

So obliging that he ne'er obliged

are not much in Mr. Chesterton's poetic style, but they bear some resemblance, in their balance

of phrasing and their antithetical use of the same word, as well as in their smoothness and pungency, to the epigrams which are scattered so thickly over his essays. One of the best of these, which achieved the honour of being twice quoted in Parliament, referred to the secret funds of the two great political parties. "Rich men pay into them and are made peers; poor men are paid out of them and are made slaves." It would be difficult to put the state of the case with more biting brevity.

Mr. Chesterton's preoccupation with propaganda has undoubtedly made him a less perfect artist than he might have been. His sense of pure beauty has to an extent been blunted by it. His first object is always to make his point effective, and beauty of expression only comes to him when his theme so inspires him as to make it instinctive. In his style you will sometimes find ugly flaws and careless discords which would be impossible to a man who valued the beauty of words for its own sake. Yet when

The Gladiator as Artist 231

it suits his mood, he can make his prose sing as nobly as that of any living writer. The "Defence of Rash Vows" is for the most part just such a clever *tour de force* of advocacy as the "Defence of Penny Dreadfuls" which I have already noticed. But in its peroration Mr. Chesterton suddenly catches the note of genuine poetry, and produces a rhetorical passage of which Ruskin need not have been ashamed.

" . . . There are thrilling moments, doubtless, for the spectator, the amateur, and the æsthete; but there is one thrill that is known only to the soldier who fights for his own flag, to the ascetic who starves himself for his own illumination, to the lover who makes finally his own choice.⁴ And it is this transfiguring self-discipline that makes the vow a truly sane thing. It must have satisfied even the giant hunger of the soul of a lover or a poet to know that in consequence of some one instant of decision

that stange chain would hang for centuries in the Alps among the silences of stars and snows. All around us is the city of small sins, abounding in backways and retreats, but surely, sooner or later, the towering flame will rise from the harbour, announcing that the reign of the cowards is over and a man is burning his ships."

I know nothing better of its kind in contemporary literature than that, unless it be the passage in "The Napoleon of Notting Hill," where Adam Wayne propounds to the King his remedy for the prosaic flippancy of modern life :

"‘I know,’ he said, in a strange, almost sleepy voice; ‘there is truth in what you say, too. It is hard not to laugh at the common names—I only say we should not. I have thought of a remedy; but such thoughts are rather terrible.’

"‘What thoughts?’ asked Auberon.

The Gladiator as Artist 233

“The Provost of Notting Hill seemed to have fallen into a kind of trance ; in his eyes was an elvish light.

“‘I know of a magic wand, but it is a wand that only one or two may rightly use, and only seldom. It is a fairy wand of great fear, stronger than those who use it—often frightful, often wicked to use. But whatever is touched with it is never again wholly common ; whatever is touched with it takes a magic from outside the world. If I touch with this fairy wand the railways and the roads of Notting Hill, men will love them, and be afraid of them for ever.’

“‘What the Devil are you talking about ?’ asked the King.

“‘It has made mean landscapes magnificent, and hovels outlast cathedrals,’ went on the madman. ‘Why should it not make lamp-posts fairer than Greek lamps, and an omnibus ride like a painted ship ?

The touch of it is the finger of a strange perfection.'

"'What is your wand?' cried the King impatiently.

"'There it is,' said Wayne; and pointed to the floor, where his sword lay flat and shining."

Of late years Mr. Chesterton has shown some sign of relaxing of extreme vehemence of his controversial method. Often in his stories, and now and again in his weekly articles in the "Daily News," he drops the propagandist attitude for a moment, and lets his humour, imagination, and sense of poetry have free play. The result certainly justifies us in believing that Mr. Chesterton has been partly spoiled as an artist by his persistent preoccupation with his gospel. Some of these more irresponsible articles are among the best things he has done. It is true that the humorous ones seem occasionally little more than school-boyish exhibitions of high

The Gladiator as Artist 235

spirits, delightful to read, but simply impossible to treat critically. I remember an extraordinary article in the "Daily News" about various people who wanted to rebuild St. Paul's Cathedral. I suppose there was some symbolism behind it, but to me it was valuable in virtue of its quite exquisite insanity. One man wanted it built of cubes one on top of the other, each a little smaller than the one below. "If it were built like that it would never fall down." "Does it not occur to you that if it were built like that, we should want it to fall down?" Then there was another (a German) who wanted the top to be larger than the bottom, "like the trees that from the bosom of the great Nature-Mother spring." I am quoting from memory; I would not profane my recollections of that gorgeous piece of absurdity by coldly looking it up. I don't know what it all meant, but it gave me great delight at the time.

As some of these lighter fragments were pure humour, others were pure poetry. And some

of them served to show how rich is the imagination, and how really keen the sense of beauty of which Mr. Chesterton only allows himself to give us glimpses in his more responsible work.

That reminds me that I want very much to know why we have not had another volume of poetry from Mr. Chesterton. Since "The Wild Knight" (his first serious publication) he has given us no book of verse. Yet, curiously enough, his verse, judged by the occasional samples contributed to the Press, shows a decided improvement on his earlier efforts which is not noticeable in his prose. His latest essays, as I have said, are not from a technical point of view observably better than those in "The Defendant"; but some of the poetry which has recently appeared from his pen is quite unmistakably better than the best of "The Wild Knight."

His sense of beauty and of the music of words has developed. Vigorous and original as was much of "The Wild Knight," there was hardly

The Gladiator as Artist 237

any beauty in it. His work aimed at strength rather than grace; it startled and thrilled rather than moved and melted. But there is real beauty, and that of a high order, in such lines as these, taken from a fragment of a "Ballad Epic of Alfred," published in the "Daily News":

And every English maid that walks
In good thought apart
May break the guard of the three Kings
And know the dear and dreadful things
I hid within my heart.

Again, there is poetry and music of a kind quite alien from that of "The Wild Knight" in the Christmas poem which he wrote for the "Daily News," beginning :

Step softly under snow and rain
To find the place where men can stay,—
The way is all so very plain
That we may lose the way.

And later :

Step humbly ; humble are the skies
And very lone and fierce the star ;
So very near the manger lies
That we may travel far.

The best and most original quality of Mr. Chesterton's recent poetry is the skill with which he has learned to blend the poignancy of epigram with the poignancy of poetry. This very poem, after its perfect introduction, goes on :

We have gone round and round the hill
And lost the wood among the trees,
And found long names for every ill,
And served the mad gods, naming still
The Furies, the Eumenides.

The Gods of violence took the veil
Of vision and philosophy ;
The Serpent that brought all men bale,
He bites his own accursed tail,
And calls himself Eternity.

But perhaps the most admirable example of this wedding of epigram and poetry will be found in a poem called "The Secret People," which appeared in "The Neolith." It was on a very characteristic theme, the silence of the English people throughout their history :

Smile at us, pay us, pass us, but do not quite forget,
For we are the people of England, and we have not
spoken yet.

The Gladiator as Artist 239

In this poem he really contrives, without once dropping out of the key of high poetry, to sum up whole epochs of English history in swift and unforgettable phrases. What, for instance, could more fully describe the state of England after the Wars of the Roses than the line :

And there was only a naked people under a naked Crown.

Or again, how could you more concisely express the change from Tudor to Stuart times than by the phrase :

The name of the King's Servants grew greater than
the King.

Then after a spirited description of the great French War, when :

We did and died like lions to keep ourselves in chains,
comes the two powerful verses in which, as it seems to me, Mr. Chesterton touches his high-water mark :

Our patch of glory ended, we never heard guns again.
But the squire seemed struck in the saddle, he was foolish,
as if in pain.

He leant on a chattering lawyer, he clutched at a cringing Jew.

He was stricken, may-be after all he was stricken at Waterloo :

Or perhaps the ghosts of the shaven men whose gold was in his house

Came back in shining shapes at last to spoil his last carouse,
Only we see the last sad squires ride slowly towards the sea.
And a new people takes the land. And still it is not we.

They have given us over into the hands of the new unhappy lords,

Lords without anger or honour, who dare not carry their swords.

They fight by shuffling papers ; they have dead, bright alien eyes :

They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.

The load of their loveless pity is worse than the ancient wrongs.

Their doors are shut in the evening ; and they have no songs.

That last line will serve well to show Mr. Chesterton's increased power over his instrument. Notice the deliberate irregularity of "and they have no songs," compared with the dactylic "worse than the ancient wrongs" of

The Gladiator as Artist 241

the line before, so swiftly suggesting the desolation of the atmosphere described. The same improved technique may be seen in another Christmas poem which appeared in "The Commonwealth," where two metres were employed alternately to suggest the two sides of the Christian religion :

The happy, silent hill and wood
Are bowed about the Holy Birth,
And for one little hour the Earth
Is lazy with the love of good,
But ready are you and ready am I
When the trumpets blow and the guns go by.
For we are for all men under the Sun,
And they are against us every one.

And so on, through a rattle of eight lines.

It seems rather a pity that, with such rich capabilities almost unexploited, Mr. Chesterton has not found time to get together and publish another volume of verse. Of course it might be urged that the greater advance which he has made in verse than in prose is in part due to his having permitted the soil of his talents in this

direction to lie fallow for a season. Perhaps, if he had written verse as unremittingly as he has written essays, his poetic style would have shown as little progress as his prose style. Perhaps, on the other hand, if he had given himself as much rest from essay writing as from poetry, the technique of "Heretics" might have shown as marked an improvement on that of "The Defendant" as the technique of "The Secret People" does on that of "The Wild Knight." I am willing to leave the question an open one. All the same, I should like to see another volume of verse from his pen, and I would give a good many introductions to various people to get it.

But his gift for serious verse is by no means the only talent which Mr. Chesterton has allowed to lie almost unused so far at any rate as his public utterance goes. He has a rare and genuine gift for the sort of verse of which I gave an example in an earlier chapter—the "report" of Mr. Chamberlain's speech. Of this sort of light verse he pours out an enormous amount

The Gladiator as Artist 243

for the amusement of his personal friends, but hardly any of it has ever got published—indeed, some of the most delightful specimens are much too irresponsibly violent in their personalities for publication.

Mr. Chesterton may almost be said to have invented a new form of light verse, though few specimens of it have seen the light. He has abundant wit and deep-seated humour, and that trick of smooth and easy rhythm which adds so much to the fun of Calverley and of Gilbert. But he adds to these a new and very characteristic touch of his own. He will often end a poem, the bulk of which is simply gorgeous fooling, with a sudden and thrilling note of seriousness. It is difficult to give examples, because nearly all the poems concerned are unpublished, and most of them are unpublishable. But one that has already found its way (though obscurely) into print will give an idea of what I mean. The "Tribune" newspaper, by some odd confusion, described G. K. C. as having been born in 1856.

The maligned writer immediately sent the Editor a "ballade" repudiating the suggestion.

The first verse ran :

I am not fond of anthropoids as such.
I never went to Mr. Darwin's school.
Old Tyndall's ether, that he liked so much,
Leaves me, I fear, comparatively cool.
I cannot say my heart with hope is full
Because a donkey, by continual kicks,
Turns slowly into something like a mule—
I was not born in 1856.

Then follows another verse in the same vein ;
and then the third, with its ringing change of
tone :

Age of my fathers ! Truer at the touch
Than mine ! Great age of Dickens, youth and yule !
Had your strong virtues stood without a crutch,
I might have deemed man had no need of rule,
But I was born when petty poets pule,
When madmen used your liberty to mix
Lucre and lust, bestial and beautiful, ——
I was not born in 1856.

To summarize Mr. Chesterton's position as
a writer we may say that, while he lacks the

The Gladiator as Artist 245

careful workmanship, the regard for true proportion, the sensitive æsthetic conscience which would make him a great artist, he has enough artistry for the work he wants to do, and a little to spare, and this is backed by so prodigious a stock of vital energy, by so much humour, imagination, pugnacity, and sense of romance, that one forgets the slips and defects in the great mass of achievement. Probably, to a Chesterton, at any rate, that achievement would be impossible without those defects. We have seen that he is by no means always at his best when he is writing most carefully. It is when he seems to be writing at post haste, careless of details, carried forward by the stream of his own invention, that his force is greatest. I have already quoted part of the description of the great fight in Hyde Park which closes the career of Adam Wayne. Nowhere does Mr. Chesterton strike more markedly the note of genius. Yet anyone who carefully examines the passage will perceive that it has been written at such break-

neck pace, and with so little revision, that Wilson "seemingly smashed like a fly" on page 285, is again "smashed and wiped down on the floor like a fly" on page 287. It is a real tribute to Mr. Chesterton's power that his narrative carries you readily past all such details, and makes you forget everything in the swing and clash of the swords.

Vitality—that is the key to all that is valuable in Mr. Chesterton's work. As an essayist and critic, his work has a thousand defects, both in substance and form. But it is saved by his vigorous pugnacity, his Donnybrook *joie de vivre*, his readiness to challenge anybody and everybody to instant combat. As a story-teller he lacks all the qualities which one would suppose were needful, yet he has the one thing that is really needful. His tales are carried forward on a tide of vital energy, sometimes expressing itself as sheer fun, sometimes as wild romance, but always full of vigour and life. The verse often contains ugly lines which would have been impossible to a

The Gladiator as Artist 247

careful artist, but there is hardly a poem, even among his bad poems, which is not alive with its own movements.

We must conclude, then, that Mr. Chesterton's success is at least as much due to qualities of character as to qualities of art, to his personality as to his works. It is with a study of his personality, then, that this essay on criticism may fitly conclude.

CHAPTER IX

THE PERSONAL EQUATION

THERE is probably at present no figure better known in literary circles than that of G. K. Chesterton. His huge form, half of which, as Mr. Shaw has said, is usually out of the range of vision, his great flapping hat and romantic cloak, his walk and his laugh are familiar to every one who knows the world of Fleet Street and the Strand. Whatever else he may become in the future, he has certainly become a public personality. There can, therefore, be no harm in touching upon such of his peculiarities as really throw some light upon his personality, and thence upon his work.

Mr. Chesterton carries into his private life that incurable romanticism which is so marked a feature of all that he has written. The scenes

The Personal Equation 249

which he haunts are not generally regarded as very perilous. Both Battersea and Fleet Street are, I believe, adequately policed. But Mr. Chesterton insists on traversing them armed with a sword-stick, and generally carrying a revolver in his pocket. This is not an affectation; he does not parade it to the world as a self-advertizer would. He hugs it to himself as did the lantern-bearing boys in Stevenson's delightful essay. He does it because he is really romantic, the essence of romance being a sense of the unexplored possibilities of life. I believe that in his heart of hearts G. K. C. hopes that one day some impossible thing will happen to him, and compel him to use his lethal weapons. At any rate, the sense of having them to use if he wanted to gladdens his secret heart.

Because he has this romantic temperament, this lust for unexplored possibilities, London and all great cities have a fascination for him. To Nature I do not think he has any great devotion. In the dedicatory poem to "The

Napoleon of Notting Hill," he says to Mr. Belloc :

You saw a moon on Sussex downs
A Sussex moon, untravelled still ;
I saw a moon that was the town's—
The largest lamp on Campden Hill.

If he sees the country at all he sees it only as a background to human figures. But for his holidays he likes other cities, cities steeped in a different civilization—cities of France, or Belgium, or Italy. About these he has written some of his best light articles. And it is noticeable that these are never about the "sights" of the city, but only about the things seen there. He has, one might almost say, a horror of deliberate sight-seeing. He holds that only when you come upon a historic monument or a great work of art accidentally do you really see it. Moreover, he points out in the "Dickens," the things peculiar to a country are not the historic things, but the trivial things. "Westminster Abbey is not especially a piece of English archi-

The Personal Equation 251

ture. But the hansom cab is a piece of English architecture. The imaginative Englishman will be found all day in a café, the imaginative Frenchman in a hansom cab."

It is the colour and atmosphere of the existing civilization that interests him, and the opportunities which they furnish as a background for human romance. When he has travelled in the North of France it is safe to say that he was thinking less of churches and chateaux than of such wild possibilities of what might happen there, as are recorded in "The Man who was Thursday."

Another symptom of his romanticism is his love of toy theatres. In a previous chapter I ventured to suggest that Mr. Chesterton might do well to try writing for the stage, but, after all, I fancy the toy-theatre stage is the one which would suit him best. It gives unparalleled opportunities for colour and romance, and subtle psychology is hardly possible within the limit of its conventions. "The Man who was Thurs-

day," impossible of dramatization for the ordinary stage, might be dramatized on the paste-board stage of our childhood with remarkable effect. Or why should it not be performed on the lines which "Punch and Judy" has made popular? "Sunday" would make a most impressive doll, and the paralytic professor would strike terror into the infant heart—to say nothing of Dr. Bull and his spectacles.

The growth of Mr. Chesterton's public reputation has made comparatively little difference to his mode of life. Of course his fame has carried him into new circles, and made him acquainted with men of what may roughly be called the governing class, with bishops and cabinet ministers, members of parliament, and men eminent in letters and art. But among these he has, I always fancy, something of the air of a man who has strayed into an environment interesting and even congenial, but at bottom alien to him. His type of life is still the journalistic type. The atmosphere really native to him is still the

The Personal Equation 253

atmosphere of Fleet Street. And he is never more at his ease, never more amusing, never more wholly himself, than when he is talking to his old brothers of the craft.

It would indeed be a strange thing if anyone with his keen scent for romance did not love Fleet Street. For Fleet Street is a place that really fulfils the true romantic ideal—it is a place where anything may happen. Nowhere else does one meet so many incredible people—people who seem to have stepped straight out of some wild Rabelaisian caricature. Its lies are extravagant beyond the possibilities of ordinary human imagination, yet they are often less extravagant than the truth which they cover. With all its ghastly background of tragedy, it is a paradise for the man who is expecting the unexpected. And such a man is G. K. C.

He has a genuine love for Fleet Street, and he gives the impression of wasting a great deal of time there, as most journalists do, even those who are really working themselves to death.

For hours he will sit over a bumper of burgundy in one of his favourite haunts, especially in a certain wine-bar which from the other side of the main road confronts the Puritanism of the "Daily News," and pour out torrents of conversation to anyone who happens to be about. He talks, especially in argument, with powerful voice and gesture. He laughs at his own jokes loudly and with quite unaffected enjoyment. He seems at such moments quite unconscious of the flight of time.

G. K. C. gives many people the impression of being a lazy man. His extraordinary lavishness in the taking of cabs has tended to enforce that view. He will take a cab half-way up a street, keep it waiting an hour or so, and then drive half-way down the street again. I know a man who met him in a little bookshop just opposite the Law Courts. A cab was, of course, waiting outside. G. K. C. drove my friend to a neighbouring hostelry about six doors farther down, just opposite St. Clement Danes.

The Personal Equation 255

There they went in and talked over their wine for three-quarters of an hour, the cab still waiting. The other man naturally thought that the cab was to take G. K. C. back to Battersea. But he was in error. When they got out it appeared that the eminent journalist was only going to the office of the "Illustrated London News," which is just about another six doors down the Strand. The total distance traversed could not have been more than a hundred and fifty yards. The time occupied was something over an hour. What the cabman charged I do not know, but as, from what I know of Mr. Chesterton, he probably got at least double his proper fare, he presumably did not do badly.

Also he is casual in his methods of work. You will find him writing, usually in penny exercise books, not only in restaurants, tea-shops, and public houses, but in cabs, on the tops of omnibuses, and even walking along the street. He is absent-minded to a degree almost incredible. He himself once announced his intention of

writing a series of stories of the Sherlock Holmes type, only for the purpose of illustrating his own inattention to detail. There was to be the "Incident of the Curate's Trousers" and "The Adventure of the Pro-Boer's Corkscrew." But the story I like best myself (which I believe to be strictly true) is that of his calling on a publisher at the hour appointed for a meeting, and placing in the publisher's own hands a letter explaining elaborately why he could not keep the appointment. All this gives a general impression of unbusinesslike slackness.

Yet it is unquestionable that Mr. Chesterton must in fact be one of the hardest workers now living. The amount of writing from his pen which actually gets published is amazing, and it is nothing to the mass that doesn't get published, that could not possibly ever be published, that is written solely for his own amusement or that of his personal friends. Every week he has a column article in the "Daily News" and a full-page article in the "Illustrated London

The Personal Equation 257

News." A continual stream of prose and verse flows from him into the presses of the other newspapers and reviews. He is indefatigable in writing introductions to everything, from "The Book of Job" to the latest novel of Gorki. His lectures are without number. Indeed, such is his activity that he is ever ready to undertake tasks which cannot possibly add either to his fame or his income. Any humble Nonconformist minister anxious to amuse his P. S. A., any group of Tooley Street tailors who call themselves the Social Democratic League of the Human Race, can draw a lecture from G. K. C. for which many reputable societies would gladly pay more than ten pounds. This may seem to recall the propagandist fervour of Mr. Bernard Shaw in his earlier days. But there is a distinction. Mr. Shaw was a Socialist, a member of a fighting society, trying to help on a practical movement which he really hoped to see succeed. But Mr. Chesterton stands for no one but himself, and, however much he may deny the existence of

"the inevitable," can hardly seriously hope for the conversion of modern London to Chestertonism through his lectures. He is merely a man expressing his opinions because he enjoys expressing them. He would express them as readily and as well to a man he met in an omnibus.

The force that keeps him so continually stirring is clearly a force that comes from within. It is not ambition or the desire for fame. He has little or none of either, at any rate in their ordinary sense. He is certainly not the sort of man either to be indifferent to other people's opinion of him, or to pretend to be so. Comradeship is a necessity of life to him. He enjoys the sound of his own voice; he laughs openly at his own jokes. But for him the moment's satisfaction is enough. He is, I should say, the last man in the world to be moved powerfully by ambition, and most of his activities are the last upon which a really ambitious man would ever enter. It is sheer pugnacity and the zest

The Personal Equation 259

of self-exposition that keeps him so constantly to the front, and forbids him to allow any opportunity of displaying and defending his ideas to pass unused.

It seems a little curious that at a time when politics are being flooded with men of letters of all types and colours, the most polemic of contemporary writers, and one who can never be persuaded to keep off political topics for more than a hundred lines together, should so far have shown no desire for a political career. I believe that he was once asked to stand for Parliament, and replied that he would stand if he were quite sure he would be defeated. The answer was probably sincere enough. He would keenly enjoy the fun of electioneering, in which he has several times indulged on other people's behalf before now, and would, I should say, be a very popular candidate on the hustings. Whether he would be equally popular with his own party if he got into the House of Commons I do not know. But I doubt if fear of his in-

dependence would prevent his being selected. He calls himself a Liberal, and the leaders and organizers of the party are not clever enough to know how much he disagrees with them. If his friend Mr. Belloc could manage it, I do not see why he cannot. No doubt he might find the House a bore at times, and might be tempted, like Mr. Cunninghame Graham, to startle it with a "damn." But, after all, it is a good club, and Mr. Chesterton is very clubable. The drink is excellent, and some of the members are quite intelligent (when they are not engaged in performing their legislative functions. Ideas are wanted in politics, and a mild eruption of G. K. C. would do His Majesty's faithful Commons no harm. As for himself, it would only add one more to activities already so numerous as to be past counting.

Mr. Chesterton's extraordinary versatility and copiousness of output is beyond question a danger to his permanent position in literature, if he cares to have one. It is true that, considering

The Personal Equation 261

the amount he writes, his level of work is remarkably high. But, unless he controls his effervescent desire to write everything that comes into his head, he will never write the best that he might have written. Of course, it is silly to quarrel with a man for his temperament ; without that pugnacity and vitality which inevitably results in over-production, G. K. C. would not be G. K. C. But I am not blaming him ; I am only pointing out the defects of his qualities. It is quite certain that he could do more than he has done if he could only make up his mind exactly what he wanted to do. Sometimes he seems to want to be a theologian, sometimes a political pamphleteer, sometimes a story-teller, sometimes a critic, sometimes a historian. He has power and vitality enough, I should say, to be any of these things, if he really wills it. But no man alive has power and vitality enough to be all of them. It must be remembered that a similar versatility (though accompanied with less interest in practical affairs

and a much more careful artistic conscience) has prevented us from ever knowing how great a man Robert Louis Stevenson really was. If Mr. Chesterton seriously wants to leave a permanent name behind, he cannot begin a moment too soon to concentrate on whatever he really thinks he can do best.

But probably he has no such ambition. It would indeed, I fancy, waken in him nothing but Rabelaisian laughter to be told that he ought to crave for the position of a classic or for an immortality of fame. It would be quite out of his character to care for posthumous reputation. In the controversies raging round him he has dealt shrewd blows, blows that will leave their mark. He has fought hard and well, and he will certainly go on fighting till he dies. Whether his words will live (that problem which has tortured so many men of genius) he probably cares nothing. If his name were to be remembered among men at all he would probably prefer the tribute that Heine demanded—the

The Personal Equation 263

sword of a brave soldier in the Liberation War of Humanity.

I have endeavoured in this book to sketch Mr. Chesterton as he is, to differentiate between what is strong and what is weak in the quality of his work, between what is sound and what is unsound in the doctrines he has preached. I have tried to do this in a sympathetic spirit, but keeping well "this side idolatry." I doubt if any good end would be served by attempting to forecast his career or the fate of his reputation. He would enjoy such a forecast, no doubt, as it would enable him to practise his own game of "Cheat the Prophet." But I have no desire to adopt that character. All I will say is that, if any of his work survives, I think it will be some of his poems, if he can be persuaded to publish the best of them in permanent form, "The Napoleon of Notting Hill," perhaps, some of the best essays in "The Defendant," and, I am inclined to think, despite the reservations I made in discussing it, the "Dickens." "Here-

tics," clever and even brilliant as much of it is, I do not think will live. It deals too largely with transitory phenomena and transitory reputations. Kipling, I imagine, our children will read, and probably Bernard Shaw. They will certainly not have forgotten Omar. But I do not imagine that the name of Mr. McCabe will be familiar to them, and one may hope that there will no longer be either vegetarians or yellow pressmen in the happier times to come. Of course, it is not safe to assume that a book will not live because it is journalistic and deals with the passing hour. The comedies of Aristophanes are as crammed with topical allusions and contemporary satire as any modern musical comedy. Yet over two thousand years have failed to age them. Horace again built a monument more enduring than brass out of what were largely in effect *vers de société*. But I do not think that Mr. Chesterton's work has quite the quality that gives to fugitive themes a permanence of its own. If he lives at all it will be by virtue

The Personal Equation 265

of those parts of his work which deal with things in their nature eternal.

Of course there is another kind of immortality which Mr. Chesterton might conceivably attain. We have seen that the force behind all his work, which gives it its value is the force of his personality—that the fascination of that personality often saves him where his technical skill and artistic taste are at fault. Is it possible that the personality divorced from the work might survive—that men might remember his personal idiosyncrasies and the casual sayings dropped in conversation after they had ceased to read a single line that he had written? I need not point out that that has happened with one great figure in English literature. Every one remembers Macaulay's epigram about Dr. Johnson, that he was "regarded in his own time as a classic and in ours as a contemporary." Mr. Chesterton is certainly not regarded as a classic, but will he be a contemporary to our children? Thousands of persons who have never opened

“*Rasselas*” or “*The Vanity of Human Wishes*” know all about Johnson’s habit of counting posts, and his inordinate love of tea. Will Mr. Chesterton’s sword-stick and his toy-theatre be remembered by people who have forgotten “*Heretics*” and “*The Napoleon of Notting Hill*”? I suppose the answer to that question depends on whether he should have the good fortune to find a Boswell.

I will leave G. K. C. without further speculation as to his destiny.

It may be that the Gulfs will wash him down ;
It may be he will touch the Happy Isles.

But, if he does, they will not be less enjoyable for his presence.

PSYCHE

**Louis Couperus' Idyll,
translated from the Dutch
by the Rev. B. S. Berrington,
B.A., with twelve illus-
trations by Dion Clayton
Calthrop. 3s. 6d.**

